
Work Begins On Turkish Part Of Iron Silk Road'

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The presidents of Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan are set to participate in the groundbreaking ceremony Thursday of a strategic railway line linking the Turkish city of Kars to Central Asia, reported the Anatolia news agency.

Turkey's Abdullah Gul, Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev and Georgia's Mikhail Saakashvili will push the button in the eastern Anatolian province of Kars for the construction of the 76-kilometer-long Turkish part of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, said Anatolia citing sources from the Transportation Ministry.

The groundbreaking ceremony for the Georgian part was held in November 2007, again with the participation of the three countries' leaders. The project will directly link Turkey with Central Asian countries, which are at the center of oil and natural gas reserves and when realized, a train setting off from London will be able to reach China. Among 14 companies, Celikler-Ozgun Construction Group was awarded the contract for the construction of the Turkish part of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. It offered a price of YTL 290 million. The entire project is expected to be complete in 2010.

Parallel to the Marmaray Project to link the European and Asian halves of Istanbul by an undersea rail tunnel across the Bosphorus, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars project will pave the way for transfer of freight from Europe to China, so that the freight transfer between Europe and Central Asia will shift to the railways.

Annually 30 million tons of freight is expected to be carried in the medium term through the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway known as the Iron Silk Road. Besides the strategic significance of the project, the railway will be an important source of income for Turkey considering the fact that the Turkish State Railways, or TCDD, annually carries 19.5 million tons of freight.

European Union candidate Turkey sees such infrastructure projects as boosting its role as a bridge for trade and energy between the East and the West.

Armenia opposes the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project bypassing its territory. Both Yerevan and the Armenian diaspora in the United States were up in arms, arguing that there is already a rail route passing through Armenia that could be used to build a trans-Caucasus railroad.
