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# Turkish PM unveils economic, cultural plans for Kurdish majority region

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ISTANBUL, Turkey: Turkey's prime minister unveiled a series of economic and cultural initiatives Saturday for the mainly Kurdish population in Turkey's troubled southeast.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan said up to US\$12 billion (=808 billion) would be spent within the next five years to improve agriculture in the mostly rural region. He also said a multilingual television channel would be launched shortly that would include Kurdish language programming.

"In the coming months, we are giving life to a project that we should have achieved decades ago as Turkey," Erdogan said in a televised speech. "The state TV and radio institution is working on a multilingual channel."

Erdogan's remarks in an address to fellow party members in southeastern Siirt province came two weeks after a military incursion into neighboring Iraq against a group of Kurdish rebels who are fighting for Kurdish-self rule.

Erdogan has said a solution to the decades-old conflict with the Kurds cannot be based only on security measures and that solutions must include economic development and nationwide cultural rights.

Some of Erdogan's views do not sit well with top military officers who have been key backers of the cross-border campaign against Kurdish rebels. Turkey's eight-day incursion into Iraq targeted rebels of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has been fighting the central government since 1984. The operation ended Feb. 29, but the military did not rule out future incursions.

The army has more than 200,000 soldiers and 55,000 pro-government village guards dedicated to the fight against an estimated 4,000-5,000 rebels. The military objects to most concessions to the Kurdish rebels whose demands for autonomy and more freedom to use the Kurdish language are backed by many of their ethnic brethren, even if growing numbers of Kurds are disillusioned with violence as a way to achieve their goals.

Gen. Ilker Basbug, commander of Turkish land forces, has urged the government to try to discourage Kurds from fighting by improving economic conditions in the region and offering leniency to those willing to lay down their arms. Turkey does not recognize Kurds as a minority. Speaking Kurdish was illegal until 1991. Turkey has granted some cultural rights to Kurds such as limited broadcasts on television at the prodding of the European Union, but advocates say more needs to be done.

Erdogan said most of the money was earmarked for building of water dams and irrigation projects as well as clearing land mines from a large area along border with Syria.

The projects are expected to provide much-needed water for arid agricultural fields, help avert a future energy bottleneck and create new jobs. The TV channel would be launched by a government agency and broadcast in three languages - Kurdish, Persian and Arabic.

Some Turkish nationalists fear increasing cultural rights could lead to the breakup of the country along ethnic lines. They worry that Turkish Kurds could be encouraged by the U.S.-supported Kurdish region in northern Iraq, which has its own government and militia.

Many Kurds have pinned their hopes on Turkey's push to join the European Union, which has said Ankara's treatment of the Kurds will be a key factor in its decision on whether to accept the country.

Erdogan's visit to southeast came ahead of Nowruz, a spring festival celebrated March 21 by Kurds as an expression of identity, when they often assert anti-government sentiment by raising rebel flags and displaying images of jailed rebel chief Abdullah Ocalan in violation of Turkish law.

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