

Azerbaijan leader's son in U.S. to visit father, talk with officials
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Azerbaijani Prime Minister Ilham Aliev arrived in the United States on Thursday to visit his father, President Geidar Aliev, who is hospitalized in Cleveland, Ohio, and to meet with government officials, a presidential spokesman said. Presidential administration spokesman Novruz Mammadov said the main purpose of Ilham Aliev's trip is to visit his father, who was taken to the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio two weeks ago after nearly a month in a Turkish hospital. The younger Aliev also plans meetings with members of the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, Mammadov said. He said Aliev he plans to discuss Azerbaijan's participation in postwar activities in Iraq, the Caucasus Mountain nation's longstanding conflict with neighboring Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, and economic projects.

Azerbaijan, an oil-rich former Soviet republic on the Caspian Sea coast, has cultivated close ties with the United States. A group of 150 Azerbaijani peacekeepers has arrived in Baghdad to participate in the international stabilization force in Iraq, the Interfax news agency reported Thursday. The U.S. visit is Ilham Aliev's first trip abroad since he was named prime minister early this month, which under constitutional changes approved last year in a referendum criticized by the opposition and foreign governments and international groups puts him first in line to take over as acting president if his 80-year-old father is incapacitated, dies or resigns.

Mammadov said Aliev's meetings in the United States would also include discussions of Azerbaijan's Oct. 15 presidential election. Both Ilham Aliev and his father are registered as candidates, though the prime minister says he is running only to assist in his father's campaign. Opposition groups are deeply suspicious that Geidar Aliev is seeking ensure a smooth transfer of power to his son and have denounced his appointment as prime minister. While it criticized last year's referendum, the United States has said the appointment was made constitutionally.