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Armenian Editor's Death Leads to Conciliation

By Susanne Fowler and Sebnem Arsu

ISTANBUL — The killing of an Armenian-Turkish editor in Istanbul last week and the sorrow it has generated within Turkey are leading to rare conciliatory gestures between Turkey and Armenia, historic enemies, and to calls for changes in laws here defending Turkish identity.

On Monday, Armenian political and spiritual figures accepted an invitation from the Turkish government to attend the funeral of Hrant Dink, the founder of an Armenian-Turkish newspaper, who was killed outside his office on Friday, apparently by a young nationalist fanatic.

The suspect in the slaying, Ogun Samast, 17, was escorted back to the scene of the crime Sunday night by law enforcement authorities.

The head of the Istanbul security forces said that Mr. Samast “was driven to commit the crime by his nationalistic feelings” and had no ties to any group.

Mr. Dink was a staunch defender of free speech and like other intellectuals was prosecuted for insulting “Turkishness” and sentenced to six months in jail, though his term was suspended.

Bulent Arinc, the parliamentary chairman from the ruling Justice and Development Party, said he would back efforts to abolish the measure under which Mr. Dink was prosecuted, known as Article 301.

“It can be discussed to totally abolish or completely revise the Article 301,” Mr. Arinc said, adding that members of Parliament “are open to this.”

Despite the fact that the Armenian-Turkish border has been sealed since 1993 and diplomatic relations severed, Armenia is sending a deputy foreign minister, Arman Kirakossian, to the funeral, and the archbishop of the Armenian Church of America, Khajag Barsamian, also accepted the government's invitation to the ceremony.

Earlier, the Armenian defense minister, Serzh Sarkisyan, called for improved relations so that Armenia could “establish ties with Turkey with no preconditions,” the Turkish news channel NTV reported.

High-level Turkish government officials are expected to attend the funeral.

Turkey and Armenia have long been at odds over Turkey's refusal to use the term “genocide” to describe the deaths of Armenians beginning in 1915. Many scholars and

most Western governments say more than a million Armenians were killed in a campaign they describe as genocide. Turkey calls the loss of life a consequence of a war in which both sides suffered casualties, and has suggested that a group of envoys from each country analyze the history. Armenia has expressed a willingness to participate but insists that the border must first be reopened to trade.

But many Armenians living abroad hold a much harder line and are lobbying the United States and European governments to deny Turkey entrance into the European Union until Ankara recognizes the killings as genocide.

Norman Stone, professor of history at Koc University in Istanbul, said Mr. Dink was killed at a time when Turkey was reacting to pressure to respond to the Armenian issue.

“There are a lot of balanced people here who say, ‘Look, the genocide issue is unclear, but if you just leave it as a matter of massacres, then we can start making progress,’ ” Mr. Stone said.

The funeral is shaping up to be far more than a farewell to a popular though controversial figure. The fact that the government is permitting it to take place on a grand scale is another sign of a change.

A wide boulevard in the heart of Istanbul’s main commercial district will be closed to traffic as the funeral cortege gathers outside the offices of the newspaper where Mr. Dink was shot.

The mayor of the district, Mustafa Sarigul, said the local government will hand out carnations and release hundreds of pigeons as a symbol of peace. Mr. Dink once said, “I may see myself as frightened as a pigeon, but I know that in this country people do not touch pigeons.”

The procession is expected to advance for about a mile before the body is driven across the Golden Horn to the Kumkapi district for a Christian funeral Mass at the Church of the Virgin Mary. Among the Turkish government officials expected to attend the Mass are the interior minister, Abdulkadir Aksu, and the deputy prime minister, Mehmet Ali Sahin. Burial is to follow at the Balikli Armenian Cemetery.

Most Armenian Turks live in Istanbul, the diverse and cosmopolitan center of Turkey. But the antinationalist demonstrations that followed Mr. Dink’s killing also surfaced in places as diverse as Izmir, the Aegean coastal city that is Turkey’s third largest, and in Sanliurfa and Hatay, which are close to Turkey’s eastern border with Syria.

“Public opinion in both countries, weary of the years-long conflict, had reached a point of explosion,” said Kaan Soyak, a director of the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Commission, the only bilateral trade council of Turkish and Armenian executives.

“That’s what lies behind the massive outpouring for Mr. Dink.”

Ethnic Armenian Turks, like Jewish and Greek Turks, are an officially recognized minority group and as such are allowed to operate their own schools. Mr. Dink, for example, attended Armenian schools in Istanbul until entering a state-run university.

Mr. Dink was labeled as a target among nationalist groups on their Web sites. Mr. Samast, the suspect, read and was influenced by those postings, according to the Anatolian news agency.

Seven other suspects were also being detained over the weekend, including Yasin Hayal, who served 11 months in jail for the bombing of a McDonald's restaurant in Trabzon in 2004.

Mr. Hayal, a known nationalist, is suspected of having a history of Islamic militant activity. He attempted to join the rebels in Chechnya but was turned away at the border, his former lawyer, Fatih Cakir, said by telephone on Sunday.

Havva Samast, Mr. Samast's mother, knew that her son and Mr. Hayal were friends.

"I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw him on television and had a shock," she said during a televised interview with the Dogan News Agency from her and her son's home city of Trabzon. "He couldn't have done this on his own. I know that he was friends with" Mr. Hayal.

But many here still blame Article 301 for Mr. Dink's death and see it as an obstacle to freedom of speech in Turkey.

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