

Turkish forum on Armenians halted, Issue seen as key to membership process for EU

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By Amberin Zaman

ANKARA, Turkey -- A court yesterday ordered the cancellation of a conference at which Turkish academics were expected to challenge the official history of the events surrounding the mass deaths among the nation's Armenians during and after World War I.

The gathering scheduled to be held today in Istanbul had been seen as a first and important step in Turkey's efforts to confront its troubled past as it seeks membership in the European Union.

The case to block the conference was brought by the Turkish Lawyers Union and other lawyers. Court officials declined to comment on why the conference was canceled. But several conference participants and Western diplomats in Ankara, the capital, said the decision was part of a broader campaign by ultranationalist elements within the state who oppose Turkey's membership in the EU.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey swiftly condemned the ruling. "I cannot approve of this decision, especially at a time when we are seeking a more democratic Turkey," he said.

Hrant Dink, managing editor of the Armenian language weekly *Agos*, who had been scheduled to address the gathering, said: "The aim is clear: It is to derail the EU process. But they will fail."

Armenians say 1.5 million of their people died between 1915 and 1923 in a genocide carried out by Ottoman Turks. Turkey has instead maintained that several hundred thousand Armenians died of starvation and exposure during forced deportations after they collaborated with invading Russian forces in eastern Turkey.

Turkey is expected to open EU membership negotiations on Oct. 3, a process that would probably continue for at least a decade. The EU has long cited Turkey's human rights record as an obstacle to membership and there are growing calls within the European bloc for Turkey to set aside its prickly nationalism and apologize for the annihilation of its once thriving Armenian community.

The state-run Anatolian news agency reported that the court had demanded various documents from conference participants, including their resumes

and proof that they were competent to address the Armenian issue. The court also reportedly sought details on the financial backers of the conference. "The demands are so laughable. I am left speechless," said a prominent Ottoman historian, Halil Bertay, who is among organizers.

Conference organizers said they would appeal the ruling and hope to proceed with their work as early as Sunday.

The forum was originally set for May but had to be postponed after Justice Minister Cemil Cicek denounced participants, saying they were "stabbing Turkey in the back."