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Official Ready to Re-examine Law Shielding Turks' Identity

By Sebnem Arsu

Correction Appended

ISTANBUL — Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul called Wednesday for changes in a controversial law that penalizes insults against Turkish identity.

[Hrant Dink](#), the Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor who was assassinated last week, had been convicted under the law late last year. Many Turks say the conviction labeled Mr. Dink a traitor in the eyes of ultranationalist groups and made him a target.

“We see that in its present version, it causes some problems,” the foreign minister said of the law, adding that his government supported free speech as long as it did not incite violence.

Mr. Gul's comments suggest that change is not far away; the government consulted civic organizations last year about revisions to the language of the law.

In the wake of Mr. Dink's slaying, calls to revise the law, Article 301 of the penal code, began with the chairman of Parliament, Bulent Arinc, when he said Saturday that he was in favor of a move against the law.

The law, which carries a jail term of six months, has been applied mostly against intellectuals, like the [Nobel laureate](#) in literature [Orhan Pamuk](#), who have commented about the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Army in the 1910s. Virtually anyone tried under the law, convicted or not, has drawn public threats and hate mail from ultranationalists.

In his last article in the Agos newspaper, which he founded, Mr. Dink expressed his fear of the threats but, according to security officials, did not request protection. Mr. Pamuk, the novelist Elif Safak, who was also tried under Article 301, and others were provided security this week, news reports said.

More than 50,000 people poured into Istanbul streets on Tuesday to protest the killing, in the largest public commemoration in the city since the death of President Turgut Ozal in 1993. Many political analysts and friends of Mr. Dink considered the huge outpouring to be an opportunity to introduce political efforts to improve relations between Armenia and Turkey.

Such efforts were given a head start this week when the Foreign Ministry extended invitations to the spiritual leaders of Armenians around the world and to the Armenian deputy foreign minister, Arman Kirakossian, whose attendance at the funeral was the first

time that a ranking Armenian official had come to Turkey since the two countries froze diplomatic relations in 1993 and closed their border.

Mr. Kirakossian, impressed by the size and the diversity of the crowd that attended three days of public protests and the funeral, said Armenia was unconditionally ready to revive diplomatic relations, the semiofficial Anatolian Agency reported.

His statement was partly echoed in Mr. Gul's carefully worded statement in Ankara. "Today, we improve our relations with all our neighbors on the basis of mutual trust and respect," Mr. Gul said. "Of course we wish to improve relations also with Armenia."

Diplomatic ties were severed during a dispute over Nagorno Karabakh, a region that Armenia claims but that Turkey recognizes as part of Azerbaijan. But the true heart of the dispute is over the Armenian genocide, in which more than one million Armenians died from 1915 to 1918.

Turkey's stance on the genocide has been that a governmental history commission should be formed to analyze the issues. Armenia has expressed a willingness to take part in a discussion but has insisted that the border be reopened to trade first.

Ogun Samast, the 17-year-old suspect in Mr. Dink's death, was formally arrested Wednesday. His lawyer, Levent Yildirim, assigned by the Istanbul Bar Association, told reporters that his client regretted killing Mr. Dink.

Yasin Hayal, an ultranationalist who had spent 11 months in jail for the bombing of a McDonald's restaurant in Trabzon in 2004, was also formally arrested Wednesday with three other suspects who had been detained and investigated for suspected links with the killing, NTV reported.

As he was escorted into the prosecutor's office in Istanbul, Mr. Hayal hurled threats about Mr. Pamuk.

"Orhan Pamuk should be careful!" he yelled at cameras.

Correction: January 31, 2007

Because of an editing error, an article on Thursday about the future of relations between Turkey and Armenia following the funeral for Hrant Dink, a Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor killed in Istanbul on Jan. 19, misidentified the issue between the two countries that Turkey has said should be examined by a governmental history commission. It is the 1915 Armenian genocide — not the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a region that Armenia claims but that Turkey recognizes as part of Azerbaijan.