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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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Subject: U.S. to provide drones to Turkey - Erdogan (Reuters)

ANKARA (Reuters) - The United States has agreed in principle to deploy U.S. Predator drones on Turkish soil to aid in the fight against Kurdish separatist rebels, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan said.

The U.S. military flies unarmed surveillance Predators based in Iraq and shares images and vital intelligence with Turkey to aid Ankara as it battles Kurdish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) rebels who have camps in northern Iraq.

Erdogan, speaking to reporters in New York on Friday where he attended a U.N. General Assembly, said Turkey has offered to buy or lease the drones and that details are being worked out.

U.S. troops are due to leave Iraq at the end of 2011. Turkish officials have expressed concern the PKK, which has bases in northern Iraq, might exploit any security vacuum left by the departure of the U.S. military from Iraq.

Security experts say Turkey is very dependent on the Predators and other spy aircraft in its fight against the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

Turkey, a NATO ally for the United States, agreed earlier this month to host a NATO early-warning radar system as part of the defences of the Western military alliance.

The Turkish military has launched air strikes and artillery raids against suspected PKK hideouts in northern Iraq in retaliation for a spate of militant attacks inside Turkey, despite opposition from Iraq's regional Kurdish government.

Erdogan said such operations will continue until the PKK lays down its weapons. Iraqi Kurdish government officials have called for the issue to be resolved through diplomatic means.

"Our decision is clear. We can not back off, we can not think about ending the cross-border operations," Erdogan said.

"If the terrorist organisation can manage to lay down weapons, naturally the operations will also stop."

There has been an increase in rhetoric by Turkey of a potential cross-border land operation into northern Iraq, possibly in cooperation with Iran, which is locked in its own conflict with an offshoot of the PKK.

The PKK has fought for Kurdish self-rule for more than 27 years in a conflict that has killed 40,000 people.

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