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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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From: OpsNewsTicker
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Subject: Turkey warns French Socialists on genocide vote (Reuters)

PARIS, Jan 16 (Reuters) - A senior Turkish diplomat warned France's opposition Socialists that if they did not block a bill to make it illegal to deny the 1915 mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks, they could damage relations with Ankara after an election this year.

Lawmakers in the lower-house National Assembly voted overwhelmingly last month in favour of a draft law outlawing genocide denial, prompting Ankara to cancel all economic, political and military meetings with Paris and recall its ambassador for consultations.

The bill will be presented to the Senate on Jan. 23 for a final vote, with the process to be completed before parliament is suspended in February ahead of presidential elections.

The Socialist Party, which holds a majority in the Senate since elections in the upper house late last year, indicated last week that most left-wing senators would support it.

"The message we are trying to pass to the Socialist Party and Francois Hollande is that you'll make a bad start with Turkey if you vote this," Kaya Turkmen, director general for Europe at the Turkish Foreign Ministry told Reuters at the Turkish embassy.

Turkmen, who has previously served in Paris, is in the French capital until the vote next week, attempting to rally support against the vote.

The legislation was originally proposed by the Socialists in 2006 with the aim of specifically criminalising the denial of an Armenian genocide. The bill was made more general in 2011, partly in the hope of appeasing the Turks.

Hollande is the frontrunner to defeat President Nicolas Sarkozy in the two-round presidential election on April 22 and May 6. The bill will be a test of the party's foreign policy programme, given that, unlike Sarkozy, it has previously backed bringing Turkey into the European Union.

Officials at the French Foreign Ministry were not immediately available to comment on Turkmen's remarks.

Ankara sees the bill, proposed by 40 deputies from Sarkozy's party, as a blatant attempt at winning the votes of some 500,000 ethnic Armenians in France and says it limits freedom of speech and meddles in a business best left to historians.

"The (Turkish) government is under pressure from public opinion," Turkmen said. "If France does this, we have to punish it one way or another."

The French government has stressed that the bill, which mandates a maximum 45,000-euro fine and a year in jail for offenders, had been put forward by lawmakers rather than itself.

Successive Turkish governments and the vast majority of Turks feel the charge of genocide is an insult to their nation. Ankara argues that there was heavy loss of life on both sides during fighting in the area.

If the bill passed, Ankara could again recall its ambassador, who returned to Paris earlier this month, and French firms could lose out on state-to-state contracts, Turkmen said.

Turkey could not impose economic sanctions, given its World Trade Organisation membership and customs' union accord with Europe. But a spat with France would create diplomatic tensions as Turkey takes an increasingly influential role in the Middle East, especially over Syria and Iran, Turkmen said.

"It won't be business as usual," he said.

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