

Schiff stands firm

By Fred Ortega, Staff Writer
Whittier Daily News

Democratic support wavered Wednesday for a resolution declaring as genocide the World War I killing of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks. Political leaders from both parties warned of strained relations with modern Turkey - whose aid the U.S. needs in the Iraq War.

But the bill's sponsor, Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, said there was still support for the resolution despite defections.

"We have a very tough fight because we have the Turkish lobby and all the money it has spent to persuade members against this resolution," said Schiff. His non-binding resolution would officially recognize the mass killings of an estimated 1.6 million Armenians between 1915 and 1923 as an act of ethnic cleansing.

The bill passed a key House committee last week and Speaker Nancy Pelosi had vowed to hold a vote on the issue within a month. But since then, several Democratic co-sponsors have withdrawn their support, citing Bush administration arguments that its passage would endanger national security by alienating NATO ally Turkey.

After the bill's passage through committee, Turkey threatened to deny the U.S. military access to its Incirlik Air Base, a key resupply point for U.S. troops in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

Pelosi showed signs of doubt about the measure's prospects Wednesday, telling reporters on Capitol Hill that whether or not the bill will come up for a vote "remains to be seen."

Schiff said he is still gauging support for the measure in the House following the defection of at least nine co-sponsors and criticism by fellow Democrats including Reps. Alcee Hastings of Florida and John Tanner of Tennessee, who urged Pelosi not to move forward with a vote.

The Turks argue that the deaths did not constitute ethnic cleansing, but resulted from the forced relocation of Armenians, many of whom sided with the invading Russian army during the war.

Schiff has been in close contact with Pelosi's office about the bill's prospects, but he has not been contacted by President Bush, Hastings or Tanner on the issue, the congressman's office said.

Bush has called Pelosi's office though, asking her to reconsider bringing the measure to a vote.

"One thing Congress should not be doing is sorting out the historical record of the Ottoman Empire," Bush said during a news conference. He called the resolution "counterproductive."

Schiff suggested the president's presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama on Tuesday - in defiance of protests from U.S. trading ally China - and his opposition to the Armenian resolution together constituted a double-standard.

"We can't be selective about when we speak out on human rights, or when we speak out against genocide," said Schiff, who shepherded the bill through the House International Relations Committee in 2005 only to have it stalled under the then-Republican-led Congress.

The movement of Schiff's bill could not have come at a worse time for relations with Turkey. Unlike China, Turkey is a U.S. ally in the administration's war on terror, said Steven Cook, a fellow with the non-partisan Council on Foreign Relations.

"If you look at Turkey and draw lines out from Ankara (the capital), you can see that Turkey sits at the center of certainly some of our most important foreign policy concerns," said Cook, author of a book on military and political developments in Turkey. "And relations with Turkey have already been damaged by the war in Iraq."

Turkish restrictions on U.S. use of its air bases or airspace would not compromise the supplying of U.S. troops, but would certainly make it more difficult, Cook said. Pentagon officials have said they are already making contingency plans for supplying U.S. troops via alternate routes.

But Schiff's resolution could have additional, less tangible repercussions, Cook said.

"U.S. defense contractors could lose contracts with Turkey and U.S. corporations would have a harder time doing business there," he said.

Turkey already suspended relations with France after that country's recognition of the Armenian killings as genocide.

Cook also said that the bill could cause a nationalist backlash in Turkey against ongoing dialogue about the Armenian Holocaust, which has been recognized by Turkish Nobel Prize winner and

author Orhan Pamuk. At the same time, it could make it more difficult for the U.S. to persuade Turkey against further military incursions against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq, a move which the Turkish parliament approved on Wednesday.

Despite the intense pressure from Turkey, the Bush administration and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, Schiff's bill is still "in good shape," said Zanku Armenian, a board member of the Armenian National Committee of America's Western Region.

He accused Turkey of threatening to endanger U.S. troops while trying to influence government policy and freedom of speech in the United States.

"Are we going to speak our minds and the truth about a genocidal crime, or are we going to give in to threats from a country that so far has proven itself too immature to deal with its own history?," said Armenian, who noted that the U.S. invasion of Iraq took place despite Turkey's prohibition on the use of its airspace.

As to the timing of the resolution, Schiff said that argument has been made before.

"We tried to advance this resolution before the war in Iraq, before Afghanistan and before 9/11 and we were told it was not the right time," Schiff said. "This is obviously a very inconvenient truth. But as Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'It is never the wrong time to do the right thing.'"

Before Schiff's bill, the last time a local politician had stirred up such an international furor was when former Pasadena Mayor Bill Papanian visited Cuba in 1996, said Caltech politics professor Michael Alvarez.

"And that was much more localized," said Alvarez, noting that Schiff likely has more Armenian constituents than any other member of Congress. "I certainly can't think of anything else by a local legislator that has had such broad implications."

What is the controversy?

Historians have estimated that more than 1.5 million Armenians died at the hands of the Ottoman Turks between 1915 and 1923. Armenians have long contended the mass killings amounted to genocide.

Turkish officials admit that hundreds of thousands of Armenians died when the Ottoman Empire forced them to relocate from Eastern Anatolia during World War I. But they deny the deaths amounted to ethnic cleansing and insist the relocations were a necessity during a time of war, when many of Turkey's Armenian citizens sided with the invading Russian army.

A nonbinding resolution by Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, would for the first time require the federal government to recognize the Armenian Holocaust as a genocide. But the legislation is facing defeat thanks to strong opposition from legislators from both parties and the Bush administration, who argue the bill will result in the U.S. military's loss of access to important Turkish bases and will make it difficult to persuade Turkey to stop military incursions into Iraq's Kurdish-controlled north.

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