Turkey pressured to join Azerbaijan conflict, PM says

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Turkey, which prides itself as the West's bridge to the Muslim states of the former Soviet Union, is under "very heavy pressure" from its own people to get involved in the ethnic war in Azerbaijan, Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel warned yesterday.

As fighting in that republic's Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh has escalated in the past month, Turkey's media have portrayed Turkish-speaking Azerbaijanis as victims of highly trained, well-armed Armenians.

Popular sentiment is growing that Turks should send weapons and troops to assist their poorly armed cousins.

"I am under very heavy pressure. There are meetings and demonstrations, even they call on the government to resign. This is a democratic country and, at some point, we won't be able to resist public opinion," Demirel said in an interview.

The prime minister said he does not know if his government, which has promised to normalize Turkey's historically antagonistic relations with bordering Armenia, will be able to hold out against public demands for military involvement.

"If they (the Armenians) continue to kill the Azerbaijanis, Turkish public opinion (would) not allow the Turkish government to be hand-in-hand with Armenia. It would be very difficult to justify it," he said.

Demirel, 67, a veteran Turkish politician now serving his seventh stint as prime minister, telephoned U.S. President George Bush last Thursday and urged him to step up the West's efforts to broker a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The prime minister said he reminded Bush of the "enormous" consequences for southeastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East if Muslim Turkey were to get involved in a conflict with Christian Armenia.

"It might become a conflict like the Arabs and Israelis," Demirel said he told Bush.

Turkey, a country of 57 million people, is the most populous Muslim nation in the region. In a neighborhood troubled by religious extremism, it has remained secular.

As a NATO member and champion of capitalism, it is viewed by Washington as a strategic buffer to the Islamic fundamentalism of Iran and the military adventurism of Iraq.
Turkey also has been successful in selling itself, its energetic banks and its business community as the West's most important conduits to the six Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union.

Demirel said yesterday the Bush administration has quickly grasped the explosive regional implications of Turkey's possible embroilment in a war that could be interpreted as Christian versus Muslim.

"For the time being, I appreciate the efforts of Mr. Bush. His efforts are very valuable and very sincere," Demirel said. He referred specifically to the trip this week of U.N. special envoy and former U.S. secretary of state Cyrus Vance to Azerbaijan.

Turkish television news has daily broadcast grisly pictures of massacred civilians, wrecked villages or homeless people.

Turkish President Turgut Ozal, who is a longtime political rival of Demirel and whose Motherland party lost control of parliament in an election last fall, has joined the angry chorus of Turks calling for Demirel to take decisive action.

"There is a need to scare the Armenians a little bit. Turkey can do a lot of things. Unfortunately, the world only understands (threats)," Ozal said in a speech.

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