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## Turkey reopening ancient Armenian church to heal wounds



By Iben Vihelabedia  
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Turkey (Reuters) - Swallows dart around the dome of the 10th century Armenian church rising from an island set amid the turquoise waters of Lake Van.

Tombstones with ancient Christian inscriptions and crosses lie scattered among the weeds in the garden, where day-trippers picnic in the shade of almond trees and sunbathe after a swim.

The serenity of the scene belies a traumatic past that haunts Turkey and Armenia to this day.

For Armenians across the world, the church in eastern Anatolia is a testimony to centuries of persecution, deportations and mass killings at the hands of Ottoman forces.

Muslim Turkey and Christian Armenia are bitterly divided over their troubled history and the border between them remains closed despite U.S.-brokered peace accords signed last year.

Today, the Church of the Holy Cross, which is now a state museum, has become a symbol of a tortuous reconciliation process as Turkey prepares to open the site on September 19 for a one-day religious service that could become an annual event.

"This church is very important for Armenians, not only in Turkey, but across the world," said Archbishop Aram Ateshian, a spiritual leader from Turkey's surviving Armenian community.

"For decades, we could not say mass or have a religious service because it was forbidden by the government," he said.

With its conical dome, frescoes depicting saints and carvings of biblical scenes on its red stone outer walls, the church is considered one of the finest architectural examples that remain of the ancient Armenian civilisation in Turkey, erased a century ago in what many regard as genocide.

Its scenic location, at the centre of the volcanic, salt lake, ringed year-round by snow-capped mountains, would make a natural draw for tourists to this poverty stricken region.

## RESTORATION OF THE CROSS

Large numbers of Armenians lived in the nearby city of Van and in eastern Anatolia until they were expelled by Ottoman forces in 1915 during the chaotic break-up of the empire.

At one point, there were 2,000 Armenian churches in Turkey, but only 45 are left standing. The rest, Armenian officials say, were destroyed, ransacked or turned into mosques or schools.

The church reopened in 2007 as a museum, following a \$1.5 million (975,000 pounds) renovation by the Turkish government. Despite pleas by church officials, a cross was not allowed on the church.

Munir Karaloglu, governor of Van province, said a cross will be placed on the dome before the mass and will remain there.

Church officials say the holy site in Akdamar, built between 915 and 921 A.D., has been appropriated by the Turkish state. Because it is a public building, expressions of religious belief are not tolerated under Turkey's strict secular constitution.

Often criticised in the West for its treatment of Christian minorities, Ankara has promoted the mass as proof of commitment to tolerance. Critics say the one-day service is a public relations campaign to improve EU candidate's Turkey's image.

## KNOTTED THREADS OF OLD ENMITIES

Efforts at normalising ties suffered a setback in April when Yerevan froze ratification of an accord after months of deadlock from both sides. It would establish ties and called for an "impartial and scientific" investigation into the 1915 events.

Armenia, backed by many historians and world parliaments, says some 1.5 million Armenians died during the upheavals that accompanied World War I and labels the events as genocide.

Ankara rejects the term genocide and says large numbers of both Christian Armenians and Muslim Turks were killed.

A Turkish foreign ministry official hoped the church mass would improve the atmosphere around the peace process.

"It will be nice if this step contributes to the normalisation process between Turkey and Armenia but we have to be realistic," the official said. "The border between Armenia and Turkey is closed due to political reasons."

Turkey closed the border in 1993 in solidarity with Muslim ally Azerbaijan in its war over Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.

Ankara says progress with Armenia is impossible until Armenia and Azerbaijan settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

## LINGERING SENSIBILITIES

Officials in Van say hotels are fully booked and that the city is bracing itself to receive Armenians "from all over the world" -- although the nearby border is closed and visitors from Armenia will have to make a 20-hour drive via Georgia or fly to faraway Istanbul and then take another flight to Van.

The Armenian Foreign Ministry did not comment on the mass, and officials in Yerevan said they have not received any invitation, but Armenian church officials saw hopeful signs of a change in attitude towards their faith.

"We are glad that Turkish authorities have partly changed their attitude on this issue, but the September 19 event is a late and insufficient step," said Vahram Melikyan, a spokesman for the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia's main church and residence of the Armenian Patriarch.

Posters inside the church these days tell visitors "Respect the history, respect the culture," but sensitivities linger.

As children ran around the empty, echoing building, two women wearing Muslim headscarves looked at the frescoes.

"Let's not stay too long. It is haram (forbidden) to be here," one of them whispered before heading out into the garden.

(Additional reporting by Ece Toksabay in Istanbul, Tulay Karadeniz in Istanbul and Hasmik Mkrtchyan in Yerevan; Editing by Jon Hemming)