Armenia and Azerbaijan see progress, but peace treaty seems distant

AFP – One year after Azerbaijan mounted a lightning offensive against Armenian separatists, the rivals are making substantial diplomatic progress together – but a peace treaty appears out of reach for now.

As world leaders met last year at the UN General Assembly, Azerbaijan swiftly seized back Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous area that had an ethnic Armenian population and had broken away three decades earlier.

The entire population of nearly 120,000 people fled to Armenia, which – weakened and embittered by the lack of support from traditional backer Russia – months later entered into talks with Azerbaijan on normalizing relations.

While some in the Armenian diaspora have sought punishment of Azerbaijan over what they described as ethnic cleansing, Western governments have focused on reaching a peace agreement in hopes of avoiding another war.

The top diplomats of Armenia and Azerbaijan are again visiting the UN General Assembly, this time not for mutual recriminations but for talks together with their Western counterparts.

The United States and France have been on the forefront of diplomatic efforts, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken expected to meet jointly with his Armenian and Azerbaijani counterparts.

Both countries insist they are committed to peace despite obstacles to overcome.

“Armenia has shown multiple times its sincere hope and determination to reach a just and durable peace in the region, with the establishment of relations between the two countries on the basis of respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity,” said Hasmik Tolmajyan, the Armenian ambassador in Paris.

– Border demarcation challenge –

Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed earlier this year to delineate a 12-kilometer (seven-mile) stretch of border – but differences have emerged on how to finalize the understanding.

Armenia wants to sign an agreement but Azerbaijan is opposed, “using the well-known diplomatic principle that nothing is agreed to until everything is agreed to,” Azerbaijani analyst Togroul Djuvarli said.

Azerbaijan’s ambassador in Paris, Leyla Abdullayeva, said that the two sides agreed on nearly 80 percent of the points in a draft peace treaty.

“But the outstanding issues,” she said, cannot be “swept under the rug.”

Azerbaijan wants Armenia to allow transportation access to its exclave of Nakhchivan, which is separated by Armenian territory, so as to offer a ground link with Turkey, Azerbaijan’s key ally.

Azerbaijan also wants Armenia to remove from its constitution a stated goal of unifying with Nagorno-Karabakh.

Some Western diplomats have voiced skepticism over Azerbaijan’s demand, saying constitutional change in Armenia would require a referendum – a long, uncertain process that would give Azerbaijan an excuse not to sign.

Potentially adding to momentum is COP29, the annual UN climate change talks that bring together officials from across the

world, which will take place in Azerbaijani capital Baku in November.

In Washington, Senator Ben Cardin, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has pressed Azerbaijani strongman Ilham Aliyev to free political prisoners and Armenian detainees ahead of COP29, an event he said “should come with responsibilities and expectations.”

Armenian analyst Hakob Badalyan doubted a peace treaty would be ready in time for COP29.

“It’s unlikely a peace agreement between Yerevan and Baku would come in the near future, unless it’s a simple document on general intentions rather than a broader peace,” he said.

“Azerbaijan does not really intend to conclude such a treaty so long as it believes the international situation allows it to continue to exercise military pressure,” he said.

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