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## France committing ‘genocide’ in Algeria: Erdogan



*\* Turkish PM accuses French president of ‘fanning hatred for electoral gains’*

ISTANBUL: Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday accused France of committing “genocide” in Algeria after French lawmakers voted a bill criminalising the denial of Armenian genocide.

“France massacred an estimated 15 percent of the Algerian population starting from 1945. This is genocide,” Erdogan told a news conference after the French move on the 1915 massacre of Armenians by Ottoman-era forces. The Turkish premier accused French President Nicolas Sarkozy of “fanning hatred of Muslims and Turks for electoral gains.” France is home to around 500,000 citizens of Armenian descent and they are seen as a key source of support for Sarkozy and his UMP ahead of presidential and legislative elections in April and June next year.

On Thursday, France’s National Assembly voted the first step towards passing a law that would

impose a jail term and a 45,000 euro fine on anyone in France who denies that the 1915 massacre of Armenians constitutes genocide. During World War I hundreds of thousands of Armenians died at the hands of Ottoman Turk forces. Armenia says 1.5 million died in genocide, Turkey says around 500,000 died in fighting after they sided with a Russian invasion.

France's Foreign Minister Alain Juppe called on Turkey not to "overreact" to a bill that he insisted was a parliamentary initiative, and not a project of Sarkozy's government. France has a 500,000-strong community of Armenian descent, many of whose forebears fled the killings a century ago, and French politicians assiduously court their votes every five years ahead of elections.

Turkey and many of Sarkozy's domestic opponents accuse him of jeopardising relations with a key NATO ally and trading partner to win Armenian votes. The war of words between France and Turkey escalated dramatically on Friday, when the Turkish premier accused Paris of committing genocide in Algeria and of stirring hatred of Muslims.

Earlier, Turkey's ambassador to France had left Paris and Ankara had announced diplomatic sanctions — banning political visits between the countries — and frozen military ties between the nominal NATO allies. "France massacred an estimated 15 percent of the Algerian population starting from 1945. This is genocide," Erdogan told reporters, accusing Sarkozy of "fanning hatred of Muslims and Turks for electoral gains."

"This vote that took place in France, a France in which five million Muslims live, clearly shows to what point racism and discrimination have reached dangerous levels in France and Europe," he said.

Paris appeared to have been caught out by the fury of Turkey's response. "I respect the views of our Turkish friends — it's a great country, a great civilisation — and they must respect ours," Sarkozy said in Prague where he was at the funeral of late Czech president Vaclav Havel.

France fought a long guerilla war between 1954 and 1962 to try to hang on to its Algerian colony. Estimates for the number of dead vary wildly. Algeria puts it at more than a million, French historians estimate 250,000. Citing earlier French action against Algerian rebels in the aftermath of World War II, Erdogan said Sarkozy's father had been a French legionnaire in Algeria in 1945 and should be able to tell his son of "massacres"