

# Kocharian Wraps Up Iran Visit

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President Robert Kocharian ended on Thursday a two-day visit to Tehran during which he and his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for the strengthening of the already close economic and political links between Armenia and Iran.

The two men met twice and presided over the signing of seven Iranian-Armenian agreements covering a broad range of areas on Wednesday. One of the agreements paves the way for the construction of a third transmission line that will connect the power grids of the two neighboring states.

The high-voltage line will allow for a substantial increase in exports of Armenian electricity to Iran after the construction of a pipeline which is due to start pumping Iranian natural gas into Armenia next year. Yerevan borrowed \$34 million from Tehran to finance the ongoing work on the first Armenian section of the pipeline and will repay the loan with electricity supplies.

Ahmadinejad and Kocharian were widely expected to discuss the under-construction pipeline and, in particular, Russia's desire to control it. However, they were not reported to have mentioned the issue at their joint news conference. The two leaders only stressed, in general terms, the need for their nations to bolster their relationship which Ahmadinejad said has a "huge potential."

"The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes and supports the development of ties with Armenia in various areas, particularly in energy fields as well as transportation, sports, and tourism," "The Tehran Times" daily quoted Ahmadinejad as saying. "I hope the Armenian president's trip to Iran would serve as an important step toward the development of all-out ties between the two countries."

Kocharian, for his part, reportedly welcomed "noticeable progress" in the development of Iranian-Armenian ties, while calling for unspecified "new steps" to implement bilateral agreements signed in the past. He also threw his weight behind an extremely ambitious idea to build a rail link between Armenia and Iran.

It is not clear whether mounting international tensions over Iran's controversial nuclear program were also on the agenda of Kocharian's separate talks with Ahmadinejad and Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki. Armenian officials have repeatedly expressed hope for a "diplomatic" solution to the dispute. Yerevan fears that possible U.S. military action against Iran could thwart the implementation of Armenian-Iranian energy projects and have other unpredictable consequences.

Kocharian highlighted Iran's significance for Armenia by choosing to publicly shake hands with Ahmadinejad and invite him to Yerevan at a time when Tehran's nuclear standoff with the West is coming to a crunch. The Iranian president is facing Western ostracism for his hard line on the issue and public denials of the Holocaust.

<http://www.armenialiberty.org/armeniareport/report/en/2006/07/416BB2DA-8FA0-46A9-B65E-57412CF0A4B4.ASP>