

Nobel winner says education priority for Turkey on return home

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The US-based Turkish-American scientist who won the 2015 Nobel Chemistry Prize said education, in particular for women, was the top priority for Turkey as he made a rare visit home to meet President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Aziz Sancar is only the second Turk to have won a Nobel prize, after novelist Orhan Pamuk who won the Nobel for literature in 2006, and was accorded a warm welcome from Erdogan at his controversial new presidential palace on the outskirts of Ankara.

Sancar has repeatedly stressed the need for his country to improve the condition of women, especially in minority Kurdish areas, where girls as young as 13 are forced to marry old men.

"I want to emphasise that I want the girls to go to school. I learned how important it is in the US," he told Turkish media on Monday. "This is the condition of modernity."

Speaking to NTV television after his 90-minute meeting with Erdogan on Tuesday, Sancar said he was homesick but relieved that the president had not offered him a job.

"I really miss my country. I wish I had returned to my country. Maybe I wouldn't be able to win the Nobel, but I would be serving my country or educating people who could then go on to win a Nobel Prize."

Then he quipped: "I was afraid Erdogan would offer me an administrative post but I am glad he didn't. It's very hard to say 'no' to the president."

Born in 1946, Sancar grew up in a village in the mainly Kurdish southeastern province of Mardin, the seventh of eight children in a lower middle-class Arabic-speaking family.

After studying medicine at Istanbul University, Sancar left Turkey in 1971 for the US, where he began his work on DNA repair that would lead to the top chemistry award, which he shared with two other scientists.

Sancar, a professor of biochemistry at the University of North Carolina, dedicated the award he received last week to modern Turkey's secular founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

He visited Atatürk's vast Anıtkabir mausoleum in Ankara and also handed over his award to the Turkish army, which is in charge of the mausoleum.

It will be formally displayed there on May 19, Turkey's official holiday of youth and sports.

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