

12:36 19 Jan Tirana welcomes Simitis as Greek prime minister

TIRANA, Jan 19 (Reuter) - Albanian Prime Minister Aleksander Meksi on Friday welcomed the election of Costas Simitis as Greece's new prime minister and said he hoped the two nations could strengthen ties.

"Your election...gives me the chance to confirm the will and readiness of the Albanian government to strengthen our friendly relations," Meksi said in a telegram sent to Athens.

Good relations between the two countries would contribute to peace in the troubled Balkan region, he said.

"I hope that Albanian-Greek relations.. will be a model for cooperation in the region and benefit peace and stability," Meksi said.

The two Balkans neighbours clashed in 1994 after Albania convicted five ethnic Greeks of espionage and arms charges, leading to mutual recriminations and a tit-for-tat expulsion of diplomats.

Ties began improving following a ground-breaking visit by Greek Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias to Tirana last March. Albanian President Sali Berisha earlier this month issued a decree lifting visa requirements for Greeks.

Albanians still require visas for Greece, however, and an estimated 300,000 Albanians have illegally entered the country in recent years. Athens has so far refused Tirana's request to allow the immigrants to take on seasonal jobs.

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Friday, 19 January 1996 12:36:13

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