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**ARMENIA HIRES LOBBYING FIRM FOR 'STRATEGIC' TALKS WITH U.S.**

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The Armenian government confirmed on Wednesday that it has hired a Washington-based lobbying firm ahead of fresh negotiations with U.S. officials which it hopes will boost U.S.-Armenian relations.

Lobbying records in Washington revealed last week a one-month contract between the government and the Alston & Bird law firm worth \$10,000. It was signed on September 15 by Armenian Ambassador to the United States Varuzhan Nersesyan and Bob Dole, a former pro-Armenian U.S. senator who now works as a special counsel at Alston & Bird.

We will assist the Republic of Armenia in its efforts to build on the strategic partnership with the United States in advance of planned diplomatic talks in October of 2020, the 97-year-old Dole said in a letter to Nersesyan.

During the course of this engagement, Alston & Bird will monitor current events relevant to US-Armenia relations and provide strategic counsel with respect to improvement of that relationship, he wrote. These services may include outreach to United States Government officials as well as Members of Congress and their staffs.

The lobbying firm will help Yerevan prepare for the final round of the U.S.-Armenia Strategic Dialogue which will take place in Washington next month. The Armenian delegation is expected to be headed by Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanian.

The format and level of the final meeting is still being discussed, said Armella Shakarian, head of the U.S. and Canada desk at the Armenian Foreign Ministry. It should be ascertained over the next week, she said.

The first session of the strategic dialogue was held in Yerevan in May 2019. Senior U.S. and Armenian officials discussed a wide range of issues and pledged to strive for closer bilateral ties. The two sides held two more sessions via a video link earlier this month.

Shakarian said that the dialogue has widened the scope of issues on the agenda of U.S.-Armenian cooperation. We expect the implementation of more far-reaching projects and the development of economic ties with the United States, she told RFE/RLs Armenian Service.

The official added that defense and security issues are also on the agenda of the dialogue. We are

discussing ways of deepening relations in these areas, she said.

U.S. officials promised greater financial assistance to Armenia following the May 2019 talks. Washington increased that assistance by 40 percent, to over \$60 million, last year to support the implementation of the Armenian governments ambitious reform agenda.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised the governments declared efforts to root out corruption, strengthen the rule of law and improve the domestic business environment when he congratulated Armenia on its Independence Day on Monday.

<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30854351.html>

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