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JUNCKER WARNS TURKEY SLIPPING AWAY FROM EU

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BRUSSELS: European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker on Tuesday warned President Recep Tayyip Erdogan against moving Turkey further away from Europe and jeopardising its EU membership bid.

Juncker was speaking as EU member states expressed "great concern" about the massive crackdown Erdogan launched after a failed July coup which has strained ties to breaking point.

His comments also come on the eve of what is expected to be a highly critical report on Turkey's accession talks.

"I say this with bitterness, I who am a friend of Turkey, that each day Turkey moves further away from Europe," Juncker said in an address to the College of Europe in Bruges.

The Turkish foreign ministry rejected Juncker's comments as baseless and bashed the EU for having "lost its credibility".

The Commission chief called on Ankara to reaffirm its commitment to join the 28-member European bloc.

"There has to be a day... when Turkey clearly says whether it really wants to be a member of the EU or not.... Everything the Turkish authorities do today makes me believe that Turkey does not want to live up to its responsibilities and respect EU norms," he said.

An EU candidate state is obliged to meet the bloc's democratic and rights standards and accession talks with Turkey, which formally began in 2005.

The latest annual review of Turkey's EU membership talks, due on Wednesday, is likely to slam Ankara's record, and reports say could point to a "severe regression".

Juncker specifically referred to an agreement with Turkey in March which offered visa liberalisation, accelerated accession talks and increased aid in return for Ankara helping to halt a massive influx of mostly Syrian refugees into the EU via Greece.

Progress on visa-free travel has been held up by EU demands -- rejected outright -- that Erdogan amend Turkey's draconian anti-terror laws to ensure they do not breach human rights.

"If tomorrow we were to refuse visa liberalisation, the fault would not be ours but the Turkish authorities. Mr Erdogan would then have explain to the Turkish people why they cannot travel freely in Europe like everyone else," Juncker said.

Earlier Monday, EU foreign affairs head Federica Mogherini issued a statement on behalf of all member states urging Turkey to safeguard democracy, just a day after Ankara gave EU ambassadors a dressing down over the bloc's growing criticism of the coup crackdown.

The EU was watching developments with "great concern", the statement said.

The Turkish foreign ministry called it was "impossible to agree with such statements" and said Ankara "gives them no value".

"The European Union in the eyes of this nation has lost its credibility and reputation in fighting against terror," it added.

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