

Trenton has a visitor from the East

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TRENTON — Trenton has a new sister city today: Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat. The Central Asian nation's president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, met with state, county, and city officials yesterday at the Trenton Marriott to discuss the possible establishment of relationships with regional businesses.

In New York this week for the gathering of the United Nations General Assembly, which included a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Berdimuhamedov took time to meet with Trenton Mayor Douglas H. Palmer, Mercer County Executive Brian M. Hughes, Mercer County Community College President Patricia Donohue and Jerry Zaro, chief of Gov. Jon Corzine's office of economic growth.

According to prominent city businessman Shelley Zeiger, the sister-city relationship between Ashgabat and Trenton will continue with the establishment of an office in Trenton, which Zeiger said he would take charge of running.

Zeiger said the office would take stock of all the companies in New Jersey and match them up with an inventory of Turkmen companies that Berdimuhamedov agreed to provide to see where potential partnerships could be built.

Zaro added that he would travel to Ashgabat in October to further flesh out details on how Turkmenistan and New Jersey could do business in a mutually beneficial way.

"They're a nation that's emerging, and they're looking to establish bilateral trade," Zaro said. "I look at it as fertile ground for our pharmaceutical industry."

Berdimuhamedov also said he would be interested in establishing an exchange program between students at Mercer County

Community College and universities in Ashgabat.

"I think there's tremendous opportunity to look at ways in which we can have a strong sister-city relationship that would involve education as well as business and commerce, and the president was very open to those things," Palmer said.

"My logic is basically to try and do some good for the state, to see if we can develop some trade with them," Zeiger added. "They're a young country, so they'll be needing a lot of equipment for different parts of their economy."

Turkmenistan sits on the world's fourth largest reserve of natural gas.

Since it declared its independence in 1991 as the dust settled from the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan has been a largely insular country. And under Berdimuhamedov, who came to power in 2006 following the unexpected death of the country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan has slowly been changing its authoritarian ways. But there is still much to be done in the way of progress.

As the Cold War ended and the former Soviet satellite states took their first fledgling steps toward independent governance, Niyazov did not bring the same democratic reforms that swept much of the rest of the region. Issuing scores of dictums regulating all manner of personal behavior — including urging a crackdown on young men wearing beards or long hair and instituting a ban on opera and ballet — he sought to brand the country in his image. He jailed political opponents after a 2002 assassination attempt and even issued an executive order that renamed the days and months on the country's calendars after himself and his family.

In what international observers took as a hopeful sign of things to

come, Berdimuhamedov reversed this last order upon taking power and has slowly been easing other restrictions on personal freedoms. Nonetheless, a report issued by the U.S. State Department in February, while citing "modest improvement," still called Turkmenistan "an authoritarian state."

Emerging from yesterday's meeting, however, officials expressed hope that open business relationships with countries like the United States would help to change Turkmenistan's ways. And in what both U.S. diplomats and participants in the meeting have accepted as a good-faith gesture, the Turkmen government offered in July to let the American military use Ashgabat as a depot for storing non-lethal supplies to forces operating in Afghanistan.

"Obviously, they've made great progress," Zaro said, "and they've been a great friend to us."



GURBANGULY BERDIMUHAMEDOV

