

Italy 'gaffe' sets off Cyprus row

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GREEKS and Greek Cypriot politicians expressed outrage yesterday at remarks by the Italian foreign minister that could herald a sea change in European and United States policy on Cyprus.

Despite the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974, and the subsequent proclamation of a breakaway Turkish state in the north, the international community has gone along with the fiction that the Greek Cypriot administration in Nicosia runs Cyprus as a whole.

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Early next year, talks on admitting the island to the European Union are due to begin with the Greek Cypriot side.

But, on Tuesday, Lamberto Dini, Italy's foreign minister, broke with the accepted conventions when he said: "There are two republics in Cyprus, two entities, two governments. If the EU does not recognise this basic fact in conducting the negotiations for membership, then you run into problems."

In fact, it already has. Talks staged by the United Nations aimed at ending the division of Cyprus broke down earlier this month after the Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denktash, said he would not take part if the EU pressed ahead with its plans.

After talks with the Turkish foreign minister, Ismail

Cem, Mr Dini said: "We have to find a formula to involve the other side as well." He explicitly backed the view that the Greek Cypriot administration did not represent the island in its entirety.

Greece's foreign minister, Theodoros Pangalos, called Mr Dini's comments "inconceivable". In Cyprus, the head of parliament, Spyros Kyprianou, said they were "totally unacceptable".

An Italian diplomat in Athens was called to see the foreign minister and the prime minister, Costas Simitis, was reported by local media to have telephoned his Italian counterpart, Romano Prodi, for an explanation. The prime minister's office in Rome confirmed that the two had spoken, but described their conversation as "cordial".

Mr Denktash seized the opportunity to repeat a warning that if Cyprus were admitted to the EU, it could start a war.

This in the second time in two years that an Italian representative has appeared to trip over the diplomatic niceties associated with Cyprus. In January 1996, a junior foreign affairs minister, Emanuele Scammacca, upset Greek Cypriots by calling Mr Denktash "president" when he met him in the north.

With Richard Holbrooke, the US envoy, expected to launch a peace initiative later this year, what will particularly worry Greeks and Greek Cypriots is Mr Dini's close relationship with the US. He lived there for more than 20 years and is seen as a friend of Washington.

The foreign ministry in Rome issued a statement yesterday noting that the only government recognised by Italy was the Greek Cypriot administration of the Republic of Cyprus. But it did not try to retract Mr Dini's words.

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