

Merger threat to Cyprus

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TURKEY and the Turkish Cypriots sent a warning shot across the European Union's bows yesterday, promising to merge into a single state if they feel threatened by the progress of Greek Cypriot membership negotiations with the EU.

As the EU talks began in Brussels, Turkish and Turkish Cypriot leaders held the first meeting of a new joint Association Council in Ankara. Sukru Sina Gurel, a Turkish spokesman, described the EU negotiations

As the Greek sector begins EU membership talks, Turkey reveals plans to form single state with the island's north

with Cyprus as a "historic mistake".

Taner Etkin, Turkish Cypriot minister in charge of foreign affairs, went further: "If our existence on the island comes under threat, we will not hesitate to unite completely with Turkey."

There has been talk of closer integration in recent months, but Mr Etkin's statement was perhaps the most blunt on the prospect of the division of Cyprus becoming permanent.

Ankara has already decided

to include Turkish Cypriots in its delegations at international meetings, and it has begun posting them to its embassies abroad.

Turkey hopes that political pressure will force the EU to suspend its talks with the Greek Cypriot government. Ankara was angry enough at being excluded from this stage of EU enlargement and the prospect of Greek Cypriot membership has added insult to injury.

The EU must now decide what to do next to solve this

problem of its own making. A proposal conveyed to the Turkish Cypriots by Britain last month, inviting them to join the Greek Cypriots in a joint delegation, was swiftly rejected.

The wily Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denktash, has made it clear that he will play no role in the negotiations unless the international community recognises the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

In the meantime, plans are being laid for even closer co-

operation with the Turkish mainland. They already share the same currency, and the same postal and telephone services.

In that respect, the threat of greater integration rings somewhat hollow because northern Cyprus is already totally dependent on Turkey, relying on considerable financial aid from Ankara, which has more than 30,000 troops stationed on the island.

Nevertheless, Cyprus still has the potential to derail the EU's enlargement plans. All

sides are warning of a dramatic escalation in tensions over the coming months.

Some form of compromise must be found before the intended delivery of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles by Russia to the Greek Cypriots later in the year. The Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, told the Greek defence minister yesterday that the missiles would be delivered on time, but Turkey has threatened to use force to prevent them being deployed.

International mediators are lining up, including the British representative, Sir David Hannay, and President Clinton's star negotiator, Richard Holbrooke.