

Greece threatens veto if EU talks to Turkish Cypriots

By MICHAEL BINYON, DIPLOMATIC EDITOR

GREECE has given its European Union partners a sharp warning that it might veto the accession of all new east European entrants if EU officials insisted on including Turkish Cypriots in talks on the island's accession.

Greece was isolated earlier this week when its EU partners, led by Britain and Germany, insisted that the Turkish Cypriots would have to be consulted at some stage during the talks, due to begin at the end of this year.

In an angry reaction Theodoros Pangalos, the Greek Foreign Minister, said the EU would pay a price for such a move. Athens and Nicosia insist that there should be no talks or negotiations that implied any recognition of the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognised by any country except Turkey.

Mr Pangalos called the stance by Britain and Germany "criminal and foolish". He refused to agree a text for a scheduled meeting between Cyprus and the EU, and it was therefore scrapped.

The Dutch, currently holding the EU presidency, said on Wednesday that it would be politically and physically impossible to admit Cyprus without progress towards healing the island's division. The message was reinforced by Hans Van Den Broek, the EU External Affairs Commissioner responsible for enlargement, who said Brussels wanted the Turkish Cypriots to take part in the talks.

The row blew up as Sir David Hannay, Britain's special envoy to Cyprus, was having talks in Athens and Ankara. Britain insists that

substantial progress in finding a political solution for Cyprus must be made this year. However, after recent violence on the Green Line and heightened tension between Greece and Turkey, the two sides are now further apart than ever. Sir David will return to Cyprus on March 11.

Britain, one of the guarantor powers in Cyprus, has reacted angrily to Greek intransigence. Malcolm Rifkind, the Foreign Secretary, made clear that there was no question of admitting only the southern half of the island. He also said that the EU negotiations should, in themselves, speed a resolution; face-to-face talks ought to begin in the next few months.

"At the end of the day, we do want to see a situation where all Cypriots are able to participate in the accession negotiations," he said. Britain had "no intention" of recognising the breakaway Turkish Cypriot state, but he made clear that only a united Cyprus could be admitted as a full member of the EU.

The row could pose a big threat to two vital EU interests: enlargement to the east, and the customs union between the EU and Turkey. Greece is already blocking EU funds aimed at offsetting Turkey's loss of revenue from tariffs lifted under the customs union. And if Athens refuses to ratify the accession of new members from central and eastern Europe, no expansion can take place at all.

Turkey, in turn, has threatened to veto the expansion of Nato if EU funds for Ankara are still blocked. The Turks say that there is a clear link between economic and security issues.