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The Problem of Little Cyprus Looms Large on the World Stage

By Flora Lewis

PARIS — Cyprus has become a UN metaphor for a conflict that no one can resolve, that drags on forever, but that isn't too troublesome and can be more or less ignored. It's the epitome of expensive "peace-keeping" that never becomes "peacemaking."

But time is running out. Several impending international deadlines could translate into great local trouble if the Cyprus deadlock is allowed to block diplomatic plans. Besides, the Greek Cypriot government seems to have decided that provoking trouble is the only way to attract attention and force the international community to act.

President Glavkos Klerides, who attended the World Economic Forum in Davos last week, denies that he ordered 70 Russian ground-to-air missiles to exercise "leverage." He

needs them for defense, he said, pointing to a June 1995 UN report that Turkey has 30,000 troops stationed on the island plus 4,500 Turkish Cypriot soldiers; that it has prepositioned large quantities of military equipment for further reinforcement, and that its warplanes have been overflying at will with no reaction from the United Nations or the British, who own two large air bases there.

But he also notes that the missiles aren't to be delivered for 18 months, that they cost \$225 million which he can ill afford, and that the order can be canceled if a settlement is arranged.

Since 1974, when Turkey invaded after a Greek-sponsored coup intended to unite Cyprus with Greece, the island has been hermetically partitioned. There

was virtually complete ethnic cleansing on both sides of the line, and a heavenly place settled down in hellish communal hatred. The Turks, 19 percent of the population, control a third of the territory. A UN force, now down to 1,100 from a peak of 2,500, patrols the dividing line that runs through the middle of the capital, Nicosia, but ugly incidents still occur.

When Britain granted independence under the accords of 1960, Greece and Turkey were also named guarantor powers of Cypriot unity and independence. As a result, their own quarrels have reinforced the Cypriot impasse. Many times a diplomatic breakthrough looked possible, but each time domestic politics in Athens or Ankara dashed the hope.

A compromise that might have been achieved locally was repeatedly blocked from outside. Now the danger is that the trouble will be internationalized much further. The European Union has promised to start negotiations for the admission of Cyprus within six months of ending its current conference on internal reform, due at the end of June but likely to be delayed a few months.

Turkish Cypriots — who have proclaimed their own republic in the north, recognized only by Turkey — say Turkey must be admitted at the same time, which simply isn't going to happen. Greece would veto.

Greece also threatens to veto the admission of Eastern European countries to NATO if Cyprus doesn't get into the EU, and Turkey, a member of NATO but not of the EU, threatens the same if Cyprus does get in.

That's only the beginning of a chain of problems that have nothing to do with Cyprus, but that get linked to the conflict. Turkey no longer has the same strategic importance that it had during the Cold War, and Mr. Klerides wants the United States to pressure Turkey to withdraw its troops and back a Cypriot compromise. But other

highly sensitive issues are involved, including Turkey's role in opposing Iraq, its Central Asian aspirations and concerns about the rise of fundamentalism in its politics.

What the Cypriot government now seeks is a new, stronger force to replace the UN, preferably a NATO force under American command, which would oversee gradual Turkish withdrawal.

Britain asked President John F. Kennedy to send troops in the early 1960s, and that activist, internationalist Washington said flatly no. In its current mood, the United States isn't likely to react more favorably.

Cyprus isn't really a religious dispute. The Orthodox ethnic Greeks and Muslim ethnic Turks got along well enough historically because of common opposition to Catholic invaders and, after World War II, to the British. Now they lack a common enemy and cannot agree between themselves without outside pressure.

It is essential to relocalize the conflict. For it to be contained, a serious multinational force is needed. And as there is no virtue in waiting for things to get worse, NATO should prepare to act.

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