

Turkey seeks support in drive for EU admission

If plea is stalled, Ankara may block plans for Nato expansion

By Robert Graham in Rome

Turkey will present a fresh request to join the European Union at the Amsterdam summit in June, in an attempt to provide fresh impetus for the country's long-standing claim to membership.

The move was announced by Ms Tansu Çiller, Turkish foreign minister, following a meeting in Rome yesterday of the "5+1", the EU's informal contact with Turkey composed of the foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

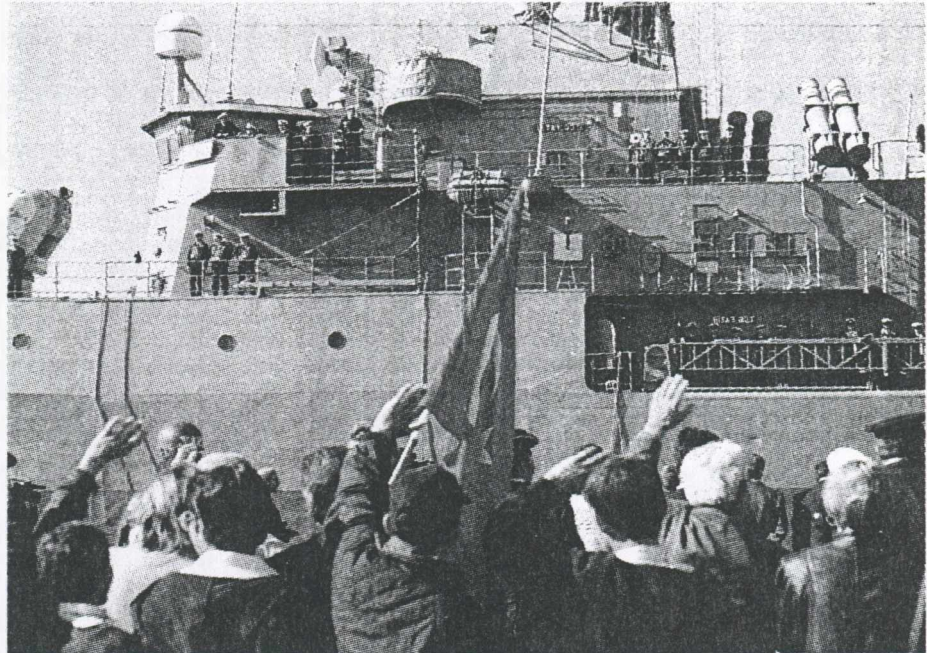
She said she had sought the five's support for this renewed request, and insisted at a press conference that "Turkey could not be excluded from the expanding map of Europe".

With an eye on her domestic audience demanding an increasingly nationalistic foreign policy, Ms Çiller repeated previous threats to link EU membership to the issue of eastwards expansion of Nato.

Turkey, she said, was prepared to block extension of Nato to include former east European communist countries if progress on EU membership remained stalled.

The EU has imposed a freeze on discussions of Turkey's membership since 1989, following concern over the country's human rights record.

Yesterday's meeting was the third of the "5+1" group, which was set up in 1995 to



Three Turkish navy ships left the port of Famagusta in northern Cyprus yesterday after a five-day visit to show Ankara's solidarity with Turkish Cypriots. The move follows the Greek Cypriot government's decision to purchase anti-aircraft missiles from Russia Reuters

create an informal framework for improving the strained relationship between the EU and Turkey.

Foreign ministers, in their public comments yesterday, were careful to encourage Turkey and to lower the temperature, in the light of the latest sabre-rattling over Cyprus that saw the despatch of a small Turkish flotilla to the island in response to the Greek Cypriot community's decision to buy Russian missiles.

But they made it clear sev-

eral key issues still impeded improvement in ties and a more rapid resolution of the EU membership request.

Mr Lamberto Dini, Italian foreign minister, listed three main obstacles: insufficient progress on the country's human rights record, the Kurdish problem, also linked to human rights, and relations with Greece.

Mr Malcolm Rifkind, British foreign secretary, said there had been some improvement on human rights but "there was still

room for more progress".

Italy's centre-left government appears keen to raise the profile of its relations with Ankara to exploit commercial opportunities. This involves a delicate balancing act with Greece.

Mr Dini observed yesterday that Greece could exercise its veto against Turkey's EU membership "within certain limits"; but this could not be extended to blocking pre-negotiations or discussions which sought to improve relations.