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Greeks feel Turkish ire over Cyprus arms

By Kerin Hope in Athens,
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Turkey yesterday blamed Greece for encouraging an arms build-up on Cyprus and said it would physically prevent the deployment of a Russian-made ground-to-air missile system by Greek Cypriots.

"If they need to be hit, they will be hit," said Mrs Tansu Çiller, Turkey's foreign minister, of the S-300 anti-aircraft missiles which Cyprus has ordered. "These offensive missiles will definitely not be deployed."

However, Greek and Greek-Cypriot officials insisted that this week's barrage of Turkish warnings – the latest of which was a threat to settle the Cypriot township of Varosha, deserted since the 1974 conflict which led to the island's partition – were less serious than they appeared.

Mrs Çiller said Athens was egging on its kinsmen in Cyprus in an attempt to "bring to the boil" the island's tensions. "Greece is undoubtedly the country which provokes, directs and supports Cyprus in this

aggressive policy," she said.

In Athens, government officials sought to distance themselves from the angry rhetoric over the arms order, although they have approved it.

Mr Costas Simitis, Greek prime minister, brushed aside statements by hawkish members of his Socialist cabinet and stressed the government remained committed to stability in the region.

"There's no reason to believe we are facing a great crisis," he said. "All this Turkish activity is something very familiar."

Mrs Çiller's statements are viewed with scepticism in Athens because of her weakened domestic position resulting from a series of scandals in her party. Greek concern would grow if her threats were echoed by Mr Necmettin Erbakan, the Islamist prime minister.

In Greece, Mr Simitis's low-key stance has run into domestic difficulties, highlighted by the resignation of Mr Christos Rozakis, the moderate deputy foreign minister, which is due to take effect next week.

Both Mr Simitis and Mr Rozakis have advocated a

policy of gradual rapprochement with Turkey, provided Ankara shows willingness to accept international arbitration in disputes over sovereignty in the Aegean.

However, Mr Simitis's room for manoeuvre is restricted by Greece's "common defence pact" with Cyprus, an inheritance from his populist predecessor, the late Andreas Papandreou.

Mr Rozakis, an expert on Greek-Turkish affairs and human rights whose brief was to overhaul policy on Turkey and Cyprus, came under attack at home for backing a US proposal for a moratorium on military flights over Cyprus. He had criticised the defence pact as an obstacle to re-uniting the island's Greek and Turkish communities.

His departure will increase the power of the hawks in the Greek parliament.

There have also been signs of tougher sentiment on the Turkish side. Turkish-Cypriots are "wondering whether there can be... a solution in an environment where one side is arming heavily", said Ms Ferai Tinç, a columnist in the daily newspaper Hürriyet.