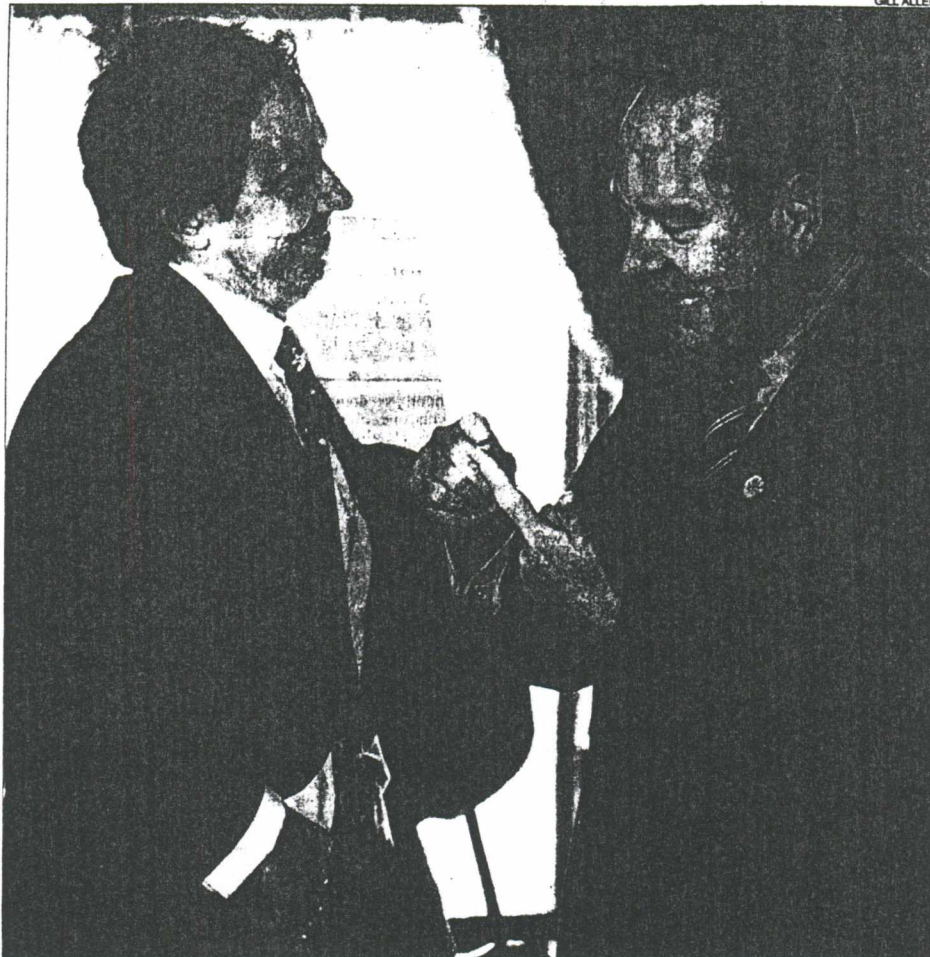


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Tony Blair and President Chirac yesterday at the EU summit, where they clashed over the admission of Cyprus

Turkish dilemma exposes EU rift

BY CHARLES BREMNER AND MICHAEL BINYON

TENSIONS over Cyprus and Turkey yesterday clouded a grand London summit to launch the expansion of the European Union to take in the divided Mediterranean island and ten former communist states in Central Europe.

In a day of lofty rhetoric from Tony Blair and 25 other European leaders about Europe's newfound unity, France and Greece signalled their readiness, for opposite reasons, to try to block negotiations.

Greece said it could freeze the whole enlargement to the east, a process expected to take well over a decade, if the Turks were "given a veto" over the accession of Cyprus. France said Cyprus might have to be kept out of entry talks.

Behind the argument lay the EU's dilemma over Turkey, a rejected suitor to the EU, which refused to attend the summit although the event had been convened largely to assuage its feelings.

Accession talks are due to start with all applicant states on March 31, but the EU wants Turkish northern Cyprus on the negotiating team. As the current President of the EU, Britain welcomed as "very courageous" a new offer from Glafkos Clerides, the Prime Minister of Cyprus, to include Turkish Cypriots on his team. However, Rauf Denktaş, leader of the Turkish community, refuses to take part in the talks.

While Britain steered a middle course, saying talks would start whether or not the Turkish Cypriots were involved,



President Chirac said that Europe would have to "wait a bit longer" if it were not possible to include the Turkish Cypriots. "If Cyprus has a vocation to join the EU, the Union does not have a vocation to take in only a piece of Cyprus and integrate conflicts that are not its own," he said.

Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, said Turkey was welcome to join the European Conference, which is to become a standing forum for

pan-European discussions among future EU members.

George Papandreou, the Greek Deputy Foreign Minister, said the Greek parliament would never ratify the accession of any new EU states "if the only reason that Cyprus is not being let in is the fact that the Turks are saying no".

The difficulty over Turkey did little to detract from the enthusiasm with which leaders of the former Eastern bloc states greeted their first recep-

America voices unease

Washington: The US Administration yesterday stressed its unease that enlargement talks did not include Turkey (Bronwen Maddox writes). "Turkey is more likely to

tion by the EU as accepted applicants to the rich Western club. Under Mr Blair's chairmanship, they agreed to new common action with the EU on drugs and international crime, as well as a declaration warning Serbia to end the violence in its Albanian-dominated province of Kosovo.

Mr Blair hailed the "extraordinary success" of "this truly historic day". It was "an extraordinary symbol of how a Europe that has been divided for decade after decade has come together".

Beyond the ceremony, however, the EU and leaders of the former Eastern bloc states are aware that years of negotiation lie ahead before the new applicants are deemed ready for membership.

The sheer unwieldiness of a future EU of up to 26 states was demonstrated by the chaotic state of many of the arrangements for the conference. Interpreters slaved from booths piled on each other in Lancaster House. More than 1,000 disgruntled foreign journalists struggled to work in a space planned for 250.

Pact vetoed: President Chirac yesterday rejected an EU plan for a broad-ranging free trade pact with the United States, saying Paris would not hesitate to block it.

"This is a decision which in principle must be taken by unanimity and we thus have a right of veto. We would not hesitate to invoke our country's vital interests," he said after the conference. Britain and Germany have hailed the planned New Transatlantic Marketplace that the European Commission has voted to pursue. (Reuters)