

Cypriot leader eyes youth vote

Elections on the divided island look set to return to power President Clerides, whose tough military policies are proving popular.

Helena Smith reports from Nicosia

CYPRUS'S septuagenarian president, Glafcos Clerides, is relying on the youth vote to return him to power in a two-round election beginning tomorrow, as the divided island prepares for its most critical year since the 1974 Turkish invasion.

As a heated campaign wound down, opinion polls predicted that most of the 17,000 "virgin voters" would back Mr Clerides in a display of support for his tough military policies.

This is the first time that 18-year-olds have been given the vote since the former Brit-

ish colony won independence 38 years ago.

Mr Clerides is running a close race against George Iacovou, a communist-backed independent and former foreign minister. The youth vote is expected to be decisive in a ballot that is unlikely to yield a clear winner until the second round on February 15.

The former wartime RAF pilot and prisoner of war might seem an odd choice of leader for teenagers. Of the five main candidates Mr Clerides is, at 78, by far the oldest, but the veteran conservative has had to do little to woo their support.

"Younger people are attracted to the policy of putting up a harder resistance and not accepting defeat so easily," said Nicos Peristianis, a sociologist. "Clerides is seen as a politician who is trying to do something."

Richard Holbrooke, President Clinton's high-profile emissary, and other mediators, such as Britain's Sir David Hannay, agree that 1998 will be the make-or-break year.

In an election dominated by defence and relations with the Turkish-occupied north of the island, the most worrying factor is what action the Turks will take if the 40 Russian anti-aircraft missiles ordered by Mr Clerides ever arrive.

Ankara has vowed to destroy the weapons if Turkish air superiority is threatened.

The promise of the weapons, and the creation of

a controversial common defence pact with Greece, have proved two of Mr Clerides's most popular moves.

The breakdown of intercommunal talks last summer and Turkey's fury at what it sees as a Greek-orchestrated rejection of its application to join the European Union have increased the fear of a big confrontation between Greece and Turkey over the island.

Yesterday a Western diplomat said the worst scenario, now being studied, foresaw the intercommunal talks not restarting, the missiles arriving, Turkey destroying them, the Greek Cypriots countering by striking the Turkish-occupied north, the Turkish Cypriots responding with an attack on the south, and the EU postponing the island's accession talks.

Greece, in turn, might carry out its threat to block next year's accession talks for

the five eastern bloc states scheduled to join the EU, while Turkey would do the same with Nato's expansion eastwards.

"It's a very frightening scenario, but yes, it could go on and on just like that," the diplomat said. "It was hoped here that the missiles would draw international attention to the Cyprus problem. Instead, they have become a potentially explosive element."

Hopes for a settlement rest on next month's attempts by international heavyweights like Mr Holbrooke to restart the United Nations-sponsored peace talks. The talks will play a vital role in getting the Turkish Cypriots to join the island's EU membership negotiations this spring.

Whoever wins the election will have to pull off a skilful balancing act if Europe's most intractable dispute is ever to be resolved.