

Greeks and Turks clash in war games

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GREECE stormed out of Nato war games in the Aegean yesterday after its jets engaged in mock dog-fights with Turkish planes in a sudden flare-up of territorial rivalry.

The move shatters a 15-month rapprochement between the two old foes.

Their joint participation in Nato's "Destined Glory" exercises — hailed 10 days ago as a big stride forward for their new spirit

of co-operation — dissolved as rival jet fighters manoeuvred in a mutual display of strength over the Aegean islands and Cyprus.

On Saturday, Greece had asked for a suspension of the war games after Turkish fighters intercepted Greek jets. Ankara said the planes had broken flight rules agreed for the regional Nato exercises by flying over demilitarised islands.

Akis Tsohatzopoulos, the Greek Defence Minister, said Turkey was infringing territorial rights in the war games by blocking access to planes flying into Turkish air space.

"Greece cannot accept that a

member state is using Nato to pursue its own interests," he said yesterday. "This behaviour is unheard of for a country hosting a Nato exercise and is devoid of any legality. The continuation of this exercise is impossible, so the decision was taken to suspend Greece's participation."

Turkish officials accused Greece of stirring up trouble to try to scupper Turkey's hopes of joining the European Union. Next month, the European Commission is due to announce a set of conditions Ankara must meet before it can join negotiations on full EU membership. One is that it settles

its long dispute with Greece over the Aegean and Cyprus.

"The Greeks are deliberately provoking a crisis over the Aegean in order to disrupt the progress Turkey is making with the EU," said a senior Turkish diplomat.

The row over Aegean air space is at the heart of their territorial disputes. The two — nominal allies within Nato — almost went to war over an uninhabited rocky outcrop in 1996. A last-minute intervention by Washington helped to avert confrontation.

This time, matters came to a head when Greek jets — ignoring Turkish warnings — used a dis-

puted air corridor over the island of Limni and were intercepted by Turkish planes. Ankara objected to the use by Greek jets of air space over Greek islands that were demilitarised under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne between Turkey and the nations allied against it in the First World War.

Turkish military officials said Greek jets were violating Nato rules and air safety regulations and gave warning of "unwanted consequences" if they continued.

Mock dogfights began last week and spread from the Aegean islands to the air space between Crete and Cyprus, where Greek

and Greek Cypriot military exercises were being held.

Tension had begun to ease in the wake of earthquakes which struck the two countries last year, with both sides rushing to help the other. A breakthrough came last December, when Greece dropped objections to Turkey's membership of the EU.

● Turkey's government ordered all foreign tourists to stay in their hotels yesterday during a national curfew for a population census. The decision angered tourism officials who described the move as a "miserable joke" and "a violation of freedom of movement".