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Cyprus deal at head of Greek agenda for EU

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and Kerin Hope in Athens

Greece will take up the six-month presidency of the European Union on January 1, a period it hopes will be marked by an agreement on Cyprus, progress on illegal immigrants, and a grand signing ceremony with the EU's 10 prospective new members at the Acropolis in Athens.

Greece's priority is to promote a settlement on Cyprus while keeping EU relations with Turkey on an even keel. Alvaro de Soto, United Nations special negotiator, has set February 28 as the next deadline for reaching at least a framework agreement. That would allow a reunited Cyprus to sign the accession treaty at the Acropolis on April 16.

George Papandreou, foreign minister, added in an interview that he hoped that "nascent fears" among the 10 accession countries could be addressed by net cash contributions from EU members, and by the new countries' participation in EU meetings after the treaties are signed.

One of the biggest questions about next year is whether all 10 countries will win the popular support they need to ratify the treaties.

"We are putting the necessary building blocs together so that we can have a sustainable EU of 25, 27, 28 [countries], maybe more when we talk about the western Balkans," Mr Papandreou said.

"Security, migration, economic developments, all this

Denktash returns to the fray

Rauf Denktash, Turkish Cypriot leader, returned to Cyprus yesterday after a long absence to tackle a UN peace plan for the island and growing opposition to his rule, **Reuters reports from Nicosia.**

Opposition figures hold Mr Denktash responsible for blocking progress on the UN reunification plan, which aims to bring Turkish and Greek Cyprus together before the island joins the European Union in 2004.

His return means all the main figures will be on the island for bargaining aimed at a February 28 deadline. Mr Denktash, 78, has been in New York since October, and had two operations.

will be part of the debate for the next six months."

The Greek presidency wants to encourage measures to improve the freedom of movement for people from countries such as Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The western Balkans, with a total population of 25m, are already a source of illegal immigrants, and the situation will worsen after Romania and Bulgaria join the EU, an event scheduled for 2007.

A US strike on Iraq could also pose a threat to the Greeks, who could have their work cut out to contain a wave of anti-Americanism led by the Socialist party's hard-left faction.