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Turkey will not be rushed into talks to end division of Cyprus

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RECEP Tayyip Erdogan, the unofficial new leader of Turkey, yesterday resisted pressure to fast-track negotiations to solve the Cyprus dispute in less than a month.

Starting in Greece, Turkey's traditional foe, Mr Erdogan is touring European capitals to seek support for his country's bid to join the European Union and to present his Islamist-inspired party as moderate and pro-Western.

Turkey is under pressure to agree to end the 28-year division of Cyprus before European leaders meet in Copenhagen next month to finalise the enlargement of the EU. After years of fruitless negotiations between leaders of the



Recep Tayyip Erdogan

mainly-Greek government in Nicosia and the breakaway Turkish-speaking northern "republic", Kofi Annan, the United Nations Secretary

General, last week unveiled a peace plan.

The core agreement, to be agreed before the Copenhagen summit, sets out how the island would be reunited under a power-sharing arrangement inspired by the Swiss canton system. Details on how it would be implemented would be negotiated after the summit.

Greek Cypriots yesterday agreed to the plan as "a basis for negotiations", but there has been no response from Raouf Denktash, the Turkish Cypriot leader who is recovering from heart surgery.

Turkey, which invaded the northern part of the island in 1974 to forestall a coup by Greek Cypriots seeking unification with Greece, holds the key to agreement. But Mr

Erdogan's Justice and Development party, which emerged from the banned Islamic movement and swept to victory in this month's general elections, has only just announced its government.

Mr Erdogan said he favoured negotiations over Cyprus but insisted the timetable was unrealistic.

"On the matter of the date, it's impossible for this to reach [a result] by the Dec 12 Copenhagen summit. Therefore keeping this under the pressure of time would be wrong."

British officials said Tony Blair, who will host Mr Erdogan on Wednesday, will tell him that Turkey's best chance of promoting its hopes of EU membership is to push its Turkish Cypriot clients agree to the UN plan.