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Turkish leader seeks time on Cyprus plan

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TURKEY'S NEW political leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, appealed for more time yesterday to respond to a United Nations plan to reunify Cyprus. He was making a historic visit to Athens on the first leg of a tour to promote Turkey's membership of the European Union.

The first high-level meeting of its kind between Greek and Turkish leaders for 10 years reinforced warming relations between the neighbours but failed to yield a firm commitment to end the 28-year division of Cyprus in time for next month's EU summit in Copenhagen.

Mr Erdogan blamed the government changeover in Ankara and the ill-health of the Turkish-Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş, saying the UN's "take it or leave it" proposal had come at an unfortunate time. "There will not be enough time before 12 December for a solution for Cyprus as laid out in the ... document," he warned.

In Copenhagen, decisions must be taken on Europe's expansion and on Turkey's ambitions to join the club. Crucially, EU leaders must decide whether to admit Cyprus. They have threatened to admit the Greek part of the island – the Republic of Cyprus – into the EU if there is no solution.



The Greek-Cypriot government officially accepted the 150-page UN document yesterday as a "basis for negotiation". It was drafted by Kofi Annan, the secretary general.

The UN plan provides the best chance of a solution to the Cyprus problem since the division in 1974. But the new Turkish government, which formally took office yesterday, is central to the success or failure of the plan because it alone can apply vital pressure on Mr Denktaş to accept the deal.

Some of the details of the territorial split proposed by the UN will inevitably lead to intensive and detailed bargaining. But the real sticking points lie elsewhere, in the complex web of relations between Turkey and Brussels. First and foremost, Ankara wants a concrete date for beginning talks on its bid for membership of the EU, a Turkish ambition for four decades.

Formally a candidate since an EU summit in December 1999, Turkey has yet to be granted the really important step: the start of formal negotiations. This is highly sensitive territory, as became evident when the man in charge of an inquiry into the future of Europe, the former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, made his explosive suggestion that the accession of Turkey would mean the end of the EU.

At a summit last month there was growing support among member states for a concession to Turkey and there is growing pressure from the United States on Europe to look more favourably on Turkish membership, as a quid pro quo for Ankara's support for a US-led attack on Iraq.

Greece has warned that it would veto EU expansion to the former Communist bloc states should Cyprus not be included,



Costas Simitis, the Greek Prime Minister, right, with Mr Erdogan yesterday AP

while Turkey had threatened to annex the Turkish-Cypriot part of the island should the Republic enter the Union before a solution.

But Mr Erdogan, the Justice and Development party (AKP) leader, indicated a softer line from Ankara, appearing to back away from earlier claims that the EU accession of Cyprus and Turkey should be linked. "We support negotiations because

we believe that politics is the art of solution of a problem," he said. "It is not an art of producing problems. We dream of the days when the problems will have been solved and we will enjoy the fruits of peace."

The UN proposal has won broad backing in Athens with its balancing act between Turkish desire for partition and Greek insistence on a federal state. But it has been attacked as un-

viable by hardliners within the government's party. The plan has avoided past arguments over a federal versus confederate solution, calling instead for a "dissoluble union" that has been compared to the Swiss model of government.

Communities on both sides of the island's green line would have final say on the proposal in simultaneous referendums.

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