

International news

UN sets deadline for Cyprus deal

Threat to expansion of EU impels Kofi Annan to act

Helena Smith in Athens

Cyprus has been given one month to secure peace — a goal which has been missed for 28 years — after Kofi Annan of the UN presented his own proposals for a solution.

The secretary general's intervention comes just weeks before a crucial summit in Copenhagen which will decide on the island's entry to the European Union. It is expected to be the UN's last attempt to secure peace on Cyprus, 28 years after Turkey invaded the north of the island in response to an Athens-inspired coup.

The EU is expected to issue formal invitations to Cyprus and nine other candidate countries during its summit

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but Turkey has threatened to annex the Turkish-occupied north if Cyprus joins the EU before a settlement and Greece has said it will veto the planned EU expansion if Cyprus is excluded from the list of candidates.

The new initiative, details of which were delivered to the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders as well as to Greece, Turkey and Britain, is believed to offer three basic choices: either they accept a sovereign state based on the model of Belgium in which the posts of president and prime minister revolve; a state based on the Swiss model, with six Greek Cypriot and three Turkish Cypriot ministers; or a state in which power is shared by an executive president and a vice-president who each have a right of veto.

Sources said the UN plan relied heavily on "creative ambiguity" in formulating a constitution that is neither federal nor confederal, in line with the British belief that a solution should not necessarily be outlined.

But although it was described as a "historic moment" by the Greek foreign minister, George Papandreou, the long awaited proposal was received with a mixture of trepidation and awkwardness in Athens, Ankara and Nicosia.

All three capitals realised that whatever the outcome, Mr Annan's peace deal would entail huge compromises.

Although the Greek Cypriots have applied for EU membership on behalf of the entire island, the Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denkash — who is currently in the US recovering from heart surgery — remains adamantly opposed to accession before Turkey also joins, saying the Greeks would exploit their EU membership to unpick a solution.

"There are going to be some very difficult negotiations ahead," Greece's EU affairs minister, Tassos Giannitsis, told the Guardian. "The question of sovereignty, and how to create a functional working state that can deal with the EU, is ultimately the most important thing we are going to have to deal with."

Alvaro de Soto, the special UN envoy conducting reunification talks between the two sides, told reporters no deadline had been set for the leaders' response.

For the Greek Cypriots, who make up 82% of the population but control just 63% of the land, the issue of territory is particularly important.

Mr Annan is thought to have proposed the gradual withdrawal of Turkish troops from the occupied north and a staggered return, over the next 20 years, of an estimated 200,000



Children walk home from school along the 'green line' of the UN buffer zone, which divides north and south Nicosia Photograph: Don McPhee

Dashed hopes

1960 Britain grants independence to Cyprus, providing for broad power-sharing between Turkish and Greek Cypriots.

1963 President Makarios abrogates power-sharing with the Turks. Inter-communal violence erupts

1964 Government formed without Turkish Cypriots. UN peacekeeping force set up.

1974 Greek military junta backs coup against Makarios. Turkish troops occupy a third of the island

1977 & 1979 Greek and

Turkish Cypriots agree Cyprus should be a bicommunal federal republic.

1983 Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denkash declares a breakaway state in northern Cyprus.

1998 Government of Cyprus begins EU accession talks.

1999-2000 UN-led talks end inconclusively.

2002 Jan 16 Reunification talks re-start and end without result

Nov 11 UN presents peace plan for Cyprus.

Reuters

refugees forcibly displaced in 1974.

The Turkish Cypriots — whose income is roughly seven times lower than the Greek Cypriots — have historically opposed the right of return, but they would be outthought and outnumbered.

"We are, it has to be said, a long way from being prepared mentally for the compromises we are going to have to make," the Greek Cypriot government spokesman, Michalis Papatrou, admitted recently.

"It is true that we have avoided airing these issues publicly but that is because every time we do so the Turkish Cypriots back down which

only renders the whole exercise pointless."

Similarly, Mr Denkash said this weekend that he feared the plan contained "unacceptable elements."

Since proclaiming independence in 1983, Mr Denkash has made international recognition of the breakaway territory his main goal. Although he has come under intense pressure from the isolated Turkish Cypriots to agree to a solution that would also enable them to join the EU, the veteran politician has shown no inclination to do so.

"At the end of the day, Denkash will have to ask whether the trappings of power mean

more to him than a settlement," one senior EU diplomat said.

The fear of compromise, unleashed by Mr Annan's move, will almost certainly be compounded by the knowledge that failure to resolve the Cyprus dispute could trigger crises in both Nato and the EU.

The Netherlands, in particular, has said it would like the island to be reunited before it enters the union.

Greece and Turkey potentially have the most to gain from a settlement, as ending the divide in Cyprus would save both a political headache.

Special report on Cyprus at guardian.co.uk/cyprus