

Cyprus

## Loosening up?

*The Economist.*

*17/5/03*

ANKARA AND NICOSIA

### Is there still a chance for a settlement in Cyprus?

**T**HREE weeks after Rauf Denktash, the Turkish-Cypriot leader, unexpectedly threw open the borders of his statelet in northern Cyprus, queues of cars still stretch for several kilometres in each direction. By May 15th, as many as 250,000 ~~Greek-Cypriots~~ and 70,000 Turkish-Cypriots—about 40% of the island's combined population—had visited what each community calls "the other side". The enthusiasm of both sorts of Cypriot for getting reacquainted after 29 years of official hostility has shocked the politicians and offered a new glimmer of hope that an island-wide settlement may be agreed before Cyprus—in practice, the southern (Greek-Cypriot) side—joins the European Union in May next year.

Greek-Cypriots are filling the cafés and restaurants of Kyrenia, a picturesque port on the north side that is known to Turks as Girne, and are gambling in northern casinos that would be banned in the south. They pile trolleys high at supermarkets, where prices are a third of those at home. Meanwhile Turkish-Cypriots visiting the south comb Nicosia's boutiques for luxury brands unavailable in the north and sip caffè lattes in trendy bars. Tearful reunions >>



of elderly neighbours from villages where Greek and Turkish populations once lived together are being shown on television on both sides of the island, with grandchildren fraternising cheerfully in English.

Most first-time trippers say the main reason for crossing the border is to find out what happened to their old homes. "It's a miracle," says Ozdogan Advinli, a 46-year-old Turkish-Cypriot car mechanic, as he tramps across the "dead zone", supervised by UN peacekeepers, that separates the Turkish- and Greek-controlled bits of Nicosia, the capital. "I shall finally see Paphos again, the place I was born."

About 180,000 Greek-Cypriots fled south when Turkish soldiers landed on the beaches outside Kyrenia in 1974 to prevent a union of Cyprus with Greece following a coup plotted in Athens. Some 40,000 Turkish-Cypriots moved north. Questions about handing back property or paying compensation will loom large in negotiating details of a settlement. Thousands of mainland Turkish settlers have moved into homes owned by Greek-Cypriots.

Mr Denktash opened the border a week after Tassos Papadopoulos, the new-Greek-Cypriot president, signed Cyprus's treaty of accession to the EU on behalf of the whole island. Kofi Annan, the UN's secretary-general, had blamed Mr Denktash publicly for the collapse in March, after decades of long and weary on-off negotiations, of the latest UN effort to reunite the island. It offered wide autonomy for the two communities in their separate zones; it also required the Turkish-Cypriots—about 18% of the total population before 1974, but now holding 37% of the island's territory—to hand over 8%.

Mr Denktash still says the Turkish-Cypriots will not enter the EU on May 1st 2004, when the new treaty to enlarge the Union takes effect. But public opinion in the north now overwhelmingly favours joining the European club. President Papadopoulos has called for the UN-sponsored reunification talks to restart as soon as possible, based on the plan Mr Denktash rejected in March. But there is a danger he may make things harder for Mr Denktash by demanding changes to the UN plan for a rotating all-island presidency, to give the Greek-Cypriots the upper hand in a loose federal-

## The Turkish-Cypriots' leader

# Rauf Denktash at bay

LEFKOSE

Could a new Turkish-Cypriot leader emerge in time to make a deal?

**R**AUF DENKTASH, the embattled Turkish-Cypriot leader, pours cold water on suggestions that "people power" has changed the equation. He insists that the status quo is working fine; all that is needed, he implies, is international recognition of the Turkish-Cypriots' northern statelet. He says he is delighted that the Greek-Cypriots need to show their passports and get visas to cross over to the Turkish side of the wire. He has even offered to let Greek-Cypriots file claims for property in Turkish-Cypriot courts.

But resentment against Mr Denktash among Turkish-Cypriots, not least poorer ones who think they will become a lot richer if the UN plan is implemented, is growing. Public opinion in the north has swung heavily in favour of doing a deal that would let the whole island join the European Union. On their recent trips south, many Turkish-Cypriots stop at a government office to apply for a Cyprus passport to let them travel and work in the EU. "We're fed up with being isolated," says Ozdil Nami, an up-and-coming businessman. "We want to join Europe."

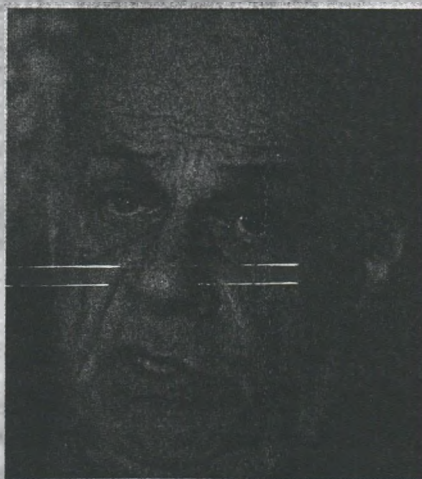
That was one reason why mainland Turkey's new reformist prime minister, Tayyip Erdogan, campaigned bravely last year in favour of the UN plan. But more recently he seems to have been persuaded by Turkey's ever-influential generals, who see northern Cyprus as a strategic asset, to back Mr Denktash and his policies once again. It is not clear, however, that he will continue to do so.

A growing number of Turkish-Cypriots are starting loudly to question the need for some 30,000 Turkish troops on the island. Many accuse their government of corruption. In February a huge

demonstration—at one guess, 70,000 people, a third of the Turkish-Cypriot population, including prominent businessmen and trade-unionists—marched through northern Nicosia shouting slogans against Mr Denktash, with placards that read, "Yes to peace, Yes to the EU."

Mr Denktash, now 79, looks haggard. He had a major heart operation in October. His legendary charm and pugnacity are fading. The demonstrators, he says, were "on the pay list of foreign powers". Most Turkish-Cypriots, he insists, are behind him. But it is unlikely that he believes his own words. And he may be running out of time. A general election is due in his self-styled "republic" in December, and opposition parties may well

lose a general election in its parliament. A new Turkish-Cypriot government could then press Mr Denktash to resign and would appoint a new negotiator readier to see the merits of the UN plan.



His time is running out

tion. The federal government would run Cyprus's relationship with the EU and oversee its judiciary and banking.

Mr Annan wants to be sure that both sides, in particular Mr Denktash, agree to the outlines of a deal before starting, once again, to negotiate the final details. Both sides would also have to agree to hold referendums to endorse a settlement plan. And the UN wants Mr Denktash to accept a timetable.

The rapprochement should consolidate over the next few months as the Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot governments adopt measures to help the two economies converge. Greek-Cypriot hoteliers and builders are looking to Turkish-Cypri-

ots to fill a worsening labour shortage in the faster-growing and by now very much richer south. Turkish-Cypriot wholesalers are keen to sell their fruit and vegetables in the south.

Nationalist politicians wary of cross-community amity warn that just a few violent incidents caused by the settling of old scores could ruin this budding Greek-Turkish friendship and close the border crossing points again. But back at the Nicosia checkpoint, Mr Advinli, the car mechanic, confidently declares that in the end "people power" will prevail. "Turkey, Denktash, the UN: we won't listen to them any more," he says. "We shall reunite our island ourselves." ■