

THE HAGUE NEGOTIATIONS

Annan struggles to salvage plan for reunifying Cyprus

By Judy Dempsey in The Hague

Kofi Annan, UN secretary-general, was last night struggling to rescue his plan to reunify Cyprus as the island's two leaders held back on a deal in last-ditch negotiations in The Hague.

Tassos Papadopoulos, recently-elected Greek Cypriot president, and Rauf Denktash, the veteran Turkish Cypriot leader, had failed to make any breakthrough in separate talks with Mr Annan.

The secretary-general had moved the negotiations from Cyprus to the Peace Palace in The Hague in an attempt to meet last night's deadline for a breakthrough to end the 29-year dispute. Senior US and British envoys were also there as part of a diplomatic offensive.

A peace deal is crucial for Turkey's hopes of joining the European Union as, whether united or not, the Greek Cypriot part will be accepted into the EU in May 2004. The Greek Cypriots are due to sign the accession treaty on April 16.

A divided island inside the EU would also do little to promote stability in the east-

ern Mediterranean, senior diplomats have warned.

Mr Annan, who with his special envoy Alvaro de Soto has spent more than three years trying to forge a settlement, was yesterday considering getting both sides to hold direct talks.

He had spent the day holding bilateral meetings with the two leaders, having twice postponed a joint session with both of them. "That just shows the mood," said a European diplomat involved in the talks. "You would think they had all the time in the world to strike a deal," he added.

Mr Denktash recently hardened his stance against any deal partly because of the shifting political circumstances in Ankara where pressure on him to reach a settlement had eased.

Mr Denktash believes the plan would create refugees and throw many Turkish Cypriots out of their homes on an island where two-thirds of the population are Greek Cypriots.

Mr Papadopoulos, meanwhile, said he still wanted improvements to a plan based on a complex power-sharing system in which

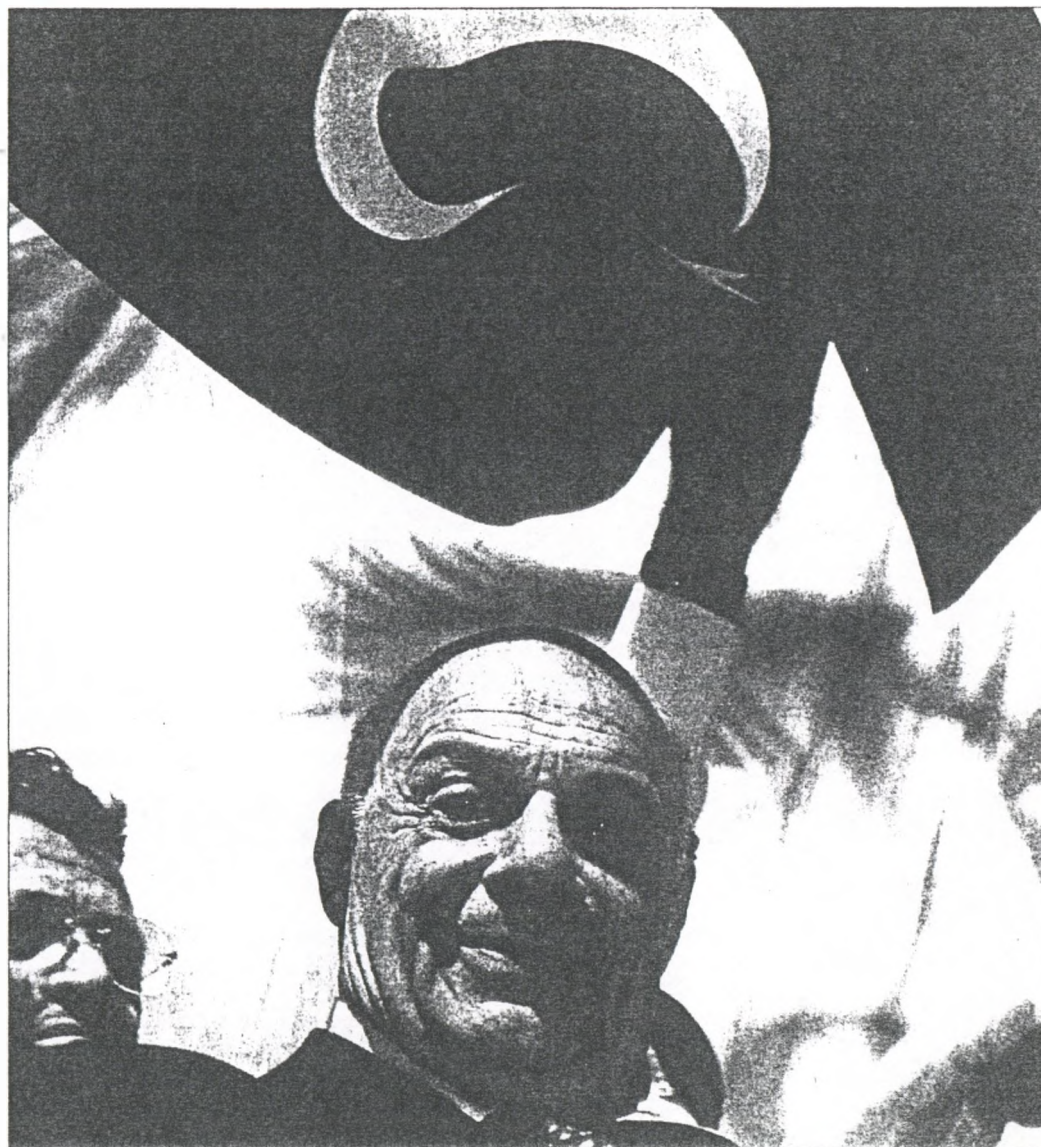
both communities would have considerable responsibilities devolved to them.

Many Greek Cypriots oppose the plan because it commits them to sharing power with a minority and puts quotas on the numbers of their own refugees returning to former homes.

Turkish diplomats yesterday said Recep Tayyip Erdogan, leader of Turkey's governing Justice and Development party, was now reluctant to apply any more pressure on Mr Denktash even though Turkish Cypriots have held demonstrations in favour of the UN deal and of joining the EU.

Turkish officials also said Mr Erdogan and the military were completely focused on the looming US-led war against Iraq, in addition to deciding whether or not to call another parliamentary vote over allowing 62,000 US troops to use Turkey as a launchpad for an attack against Iraq.

Cyprus has been partitioned since Turkish troops invaded in 1974 in response to a coup by Greek Cypriot militants seeking union with Greece. Turkey seized more than a third of the island.



Rauf Denktash speaks at a demonstration in the Turkish part of Cyprus late last week. He has hardened his stance against a deal