

## CYPRUS; CAN BURNING BRIDGES BE A STEP TOWARDS PEACE?

On the face of it, things have rarely looked less promising between the two sides in the Cyprus dispute. In his farewell statement in December, the outgoing UN Secretary-General, Mr Kofi Annan, singled out the failure to achieve a settlement on the divided island as one of the biggest disappointments of his term in office. The frustration looks set to last for the foreseeable future, poisoning the EU's relations with Turkey indefinitely. Or does it?

Certainly prospects are bleak if one looks at the leadership in the south of the island. The Greek Cypriot leader, Mr Tassos Papadopoulos, always the least conciliatory of Greek Cypriot politicians, remains firmly opposed to any deal that might involve any concession to the Turkish Cypriots. His language suggests that the sort of post-settlement Cyprus he envisages would be one in which the Turkish Cypriots enjoy only minority status in a Greek island.

Led by Mr Papadopoulos, the EU has come very close to killing off the accession negotiations with Turkey. Eight of the 35 chapters of the negotiations are now suspended in effect until Turkey admits Greek Cypriot planes and ships to its ports. The fate of the remaining eight seems yet to be at the mercy of Greek Cypriot whim. Normal logic might dictate that the EU's interests in Turkey, one of its half dozen largest trading partners and a country of over 70 million people in a key strategic location, should not be cancelled out by the wishes of 600,000 Greek Cypriots wanting to subdue their Turkish Cypriot neighbours, but where Cyprus is concerned rational choice seldom applies. Mr Papadopoulos is ably blocking everything in Brussels where Turkish Cypriots is concerned. Those EU members, who are not very happy to see speedy progress of Turkish membership, are readily complying with Mr Papadopoulos' derailment tactics on Turkey.

But look to the north of the island, and the picture is quite different. There efforts to break the deadlock are still continuing. Late last month the Turkish Cypriot leader, President Mehmet Ali Talat, showed that the Turkish Cypriots still want to take initiatives. He announced that a footbridge in central Nicosia near the dividing line between the two nationalities was to come down. This small gesture has delivered a powerful jolt to the island's political deadlock. Known as the "Lokmaci Bridge" in Turkey and as the "Ledra Street Bridge" to the Greeks, the structure went up a year ago on the site of a crossing which was due to be opened along with others. Most border crossing points on the island have now been open for three and a half years following the decision of Turkish Cypriot government on the relaxation of crossing restrictions on April 23, 2003. Travellers from North and South can now move freely between Turkish and Greek Cyprus.

But the Lokmaci Crossing remained closed. So the Turkish Cypriot authorities built a bridge over the wall and put up a sign saying "to be opened soon" indicating that they would welcome visitors from the south. But if the gesture was intended to please Greek Cypriots, it failed. The Lokmaci/Ledra Street Crossing has remained closed by the Greek Cypriot authorities. Turkish Cypriots suspect the reason is that the Ledra Street crossing would give international tourists direct access to a picturesque quarter of old Nicosia. Others suggest that the blocked crossing is a powerful symbol of the wrongs each side feels it has suffered since the barricades erected there during inter-communal violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots that flared in 1963.

Instead of opening up the crossing, the Greek Cypriots built a wall to ensure it remained closed. This fact has annoyed not only the Turkish Cypriots, but also the small but vociferous lobby in southern Cyprus which favours a negotiated peace on equal terms between the island's two nationalities. But until Mr Talat made his initiative and work to demolish the bridge started in January, the situation at Lokmaci Border Gate looked unlikely to change. His initiative was in essence a goodwill gesture in accordance with the Papadopoulos-Talat agreement on July 8, 2006, to embark on a programme of confidence-building measures after a meeting with the UN Under-Secretary-General, Ibrahim Gambari. Though UNFICYP and the US and UK Embassies have announced their hope that positive developments would follow Talat's decision and the EU Commissioner in charge of Enlargement Olli Rehn stated that they were happy to hear of the decision to take down the bridge, Greek Cypriot leader saw it as a new opportunity to reiterate his various preconditions to start inter-communal talks.

The Greek Cypriots are not the only party involved. Under Turkish Cypriot law and a temporary article in the Turkish Cypriot constitution, the bridge's foots rests on a military zone controlled by Turkish troops. Security of sentry patrols is one of the issues surrounding the bridge, and the news that the bridge was to come down was apparently taken as a rebuff by senior commanders in Ankara, who issued strong statements to the media, indicating that relations between them and Mr Talat were severely strained. Actually, Turkish Chief of Staff General Büyükanıt's statement that they would not oppose to "opening of Lokmaci barricade, but such steps need to be simultaneous" was not directed to Mr. Talat, but to the Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan.

This sort of tension would have done considerable harm to Mr Talat without the swift support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey endorsing the Turkish Cypriots' right to have the last word about things happening on their territory. Mr Erdoğan went further and said that the Turkish Cypriots had "cornered" Mr Papadopoulos. And so he has, at least in the eyes of Greek Cypriots who want a settlement. Loucas Charalambous of the Cyprus Mail wrote on January 14 "Talat deserves congratulations. If we agree that the erection of the bridge was a mistake, the fact that he had the courage to correct it, by ordering the demolition, was commendable....That is how a true leader behaves." Mr Charalambous lambasted Mr Papadopoulos for saying that the removal of an illegal bridge did not change the situation.

So talks are now finally taking place about ways of opening the crossing, though how long they will take only Mr Papadopoulos can say. The issue has been little noticed in Europe, where Mr Talat and his conciliatory policies, seldom get into the papers. But on this issue, as in 2004, the Turkish Cypriots are surely entitled to the active backing of all EU citizens who do not want to go on living with a divided member of the Union.

Mr Talat's bridge initiative should also make it easier for the German presidency to get more trade going between the Turkish Cypriots and the outside world, thus easing the economic squeeze placed on them by the south. On 22 January 2007, the EU at least acknowledged there is a need to make a move as regards the financial aid regulation in order to facilitate the reunification of Cyprus. Mr Papadopoulos has resisted them bitterly, insisting that trade with Northern Cyprus should take place only via the South and adamantly resisting any moves to allow direct flights into Ercan Airport in the North.

Will these moves work? Lasting progress in Cyprus is unlikely until the Greek Cypriots fully accept the inevitability of a bi-zonal federal state solution, something that Mr Papadopoulos in particular seems to have no stomach for. So a hasty settlement might be a short-lived one—"a house of cards" that would come tumbling down. Both in Northern Cyprus and Turkey, there are many who believe that the present political maneuvers could easily end in disaster for the Turkish Cypriots if renewed inter-communal violence breaks down after a settlement. That would also of course be a disaster for the EU.

So much depends on whether the EU and its Germany Presidency can match Mr Talat's initiative with measures allowing the Turkish Cypriots to enjoy all the rights that normally come with citizenship of an EU member country. That it sees the need to push through practical measures to end their economic isolation is a good sign, even if a belated one. Mr Papadopoulos needs to learn that siege tactics are no longer acceptable.

The Lokmaci Crisis shows clearly that unless Turkish Cypriot efforts towards a solution are reciprocated by the Greek Cypriots, and rewarded somehow by the EU or the UN, there is a growing tendency at least among some circles in Turkey to re-adopt a recently subdued hawkish policy: "The Cyprus Question is resolved in 1974, the North is the North and the South is the South." That too would be a real pity for all the sides involved, including the EU.

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