Security Council Report: The Situation in Cyprus

December 2008

Expected Council Action

In December, the Council is expected to renew the mandate of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) to 15 June 2009 without change. The mandate expires on 15 December, and the Secretary-General’s report on UNFICYP is expected by 1 December.

The Council is likely to express strong support for the ongoing negotiations between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders, Demetris Christofias and Mehmet Ali Talat, and provide encouragement for the process.


Key Recent Developments

On 3 September 2008, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders launched new full-fledged negotiations aimed at reunifying Cyprus. (In May, they committed to a partnership of a federal government with a single international identity, with Turkish and Greek Cypriot constituent states of equal status.) This was described as a historic moment by Alexander Downer, the recently appointed Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Cyprus, who was tasked to conduct the good offices mission on behalf of the Secretary-General and provide support to the parties. The Council adopted a presidential statement on 4 September welcoming the launch of negotiations and confirming its readiness to support the process.

Downer held talks with Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis and Foreign Minister Theadora Bakoyannis on 8 September, and with Turkish President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ali Babacan on 10 September.

The Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders held their first meetings on 11 September, and then met on a weekly basis to sustain momentum. Their meeting on 10 October received support from Nobel Peace laureates Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu.

The Cypriot leaders decided to focus negotiations first on the key issue of governance and power sharing. The composition of the executive branch of government, the electoral
system for president and vice-president, as well as issues concerning the legislature have been discussed. Other issues to be addressed include property rights, security guarantees, economic issues and membership in the European Union (including how EU laws and regulations would be implemented on the whole island). At a press conference in Nicosia on 11 November, Downer said negotiations were making good progress although they would be long and difficult.

It seems that the two Cypriot leaders have continued to find common ground. Details have not yet been made public, due to the principle underlying the talks that nothing has been formally agreed before everything is agreed.

A positive development was Turkey’s endorsement of the Cyprus talks on 23 September. In his address to the General Assembly plenary meeting, Turkish President Gül said, “We welcome and firmly support the comprehensive settlement negotiations”. He said the solution to the Cyprus situation lies in the establishment of a new partnership state composed of two constituent states of equal status, and emphasised that the process toward this goal should be based on the UN parameters of bizonality and political equality of the two sides.

On 24 September at the General Assembly plenary meeting, Cypriot President Demetris Christofias said the UN plays a crucial role in helping Cyprus move towards a bizonal, bicomunal federation through assistance and defining the future Cypriot state. However, he noted that the Secretary-General’s good offices were not the same as arbitration or mediation. According to Christofias, experience suggested that importing non-indigenous models would not be welcomed by Cypriots. While reiterating his willingness to solve the problem, he emphasised that Turkey had an active role to play, and hoped that the final solution would provide for a country free of foreign armies and illegal colonists.

During her address to the General Assembly on 27 September, Greek Foreign Minister Bakoyannis said Greece welcomed negotiations between the two communities and emphasised that they needed to take place without artificial deadlines and arbitration.

Options

A resolution renewing UNFICYP’s mandate without change is the likely option. An additional option, also likely to be uncontroversial, is to express the Council’s strong support and encouragement for the negotiation process.
Key Issues

The main issue for the Council at the moment is how best to express support for the negotiations without appearing to suggest that the process has encountered unexpected problems. Council members are anticipating that the first assessment of the process in the Secretary-General’s report will be helpful in striking a good balance.

A related issue is ensuring that the general environment remains favourable to the talks, as the inevitable difficulties arise.

A further question is how the good offices mission should evolve and whether it should remain focused mainly on process. The Turkish Cypriots are inclined to have the UN play a more substantive role. Greek Cypriots are more reluctant. For the Council, this means that cohesion, especially among the P5 (and avoiding the kinds of differences which have bedevilled the Western Sahara process) will be necessary along the way.

Council Dynamics

There is wide agreement that the Council at present should limit itself to expressing support for the negotiations. Many believe that despite the expected difficulties, the fact that the negotiations are proceeding and that the leaders have been meeting on a weekly basis is very positive.

Turkey’s membership in the Security Council, starting in January 2009, is unlikely to affect dynamics. Greece was careful during its term on the Council from 2005 to 2006 to be seen to be playing an even handed role. It remains to be seen what Turkey’s overall approach will be, but the fact that it has publicly supported the negotiations at the highest level is an important indicator.

Underlying Problems

Although the talks have been described as making good progress, it appears that the two leaders are already beginning to meet some of the expected difficulties on substance. A main initial sticking point seems to be whether under the new arrangements the Cypriot president would be elected simply by the majority of all Cypriots (favoured by the Greek Cypriots since they constitute the majority) or whether there should be a more complex arrangement reflecting the principle of two equal constituent partners enunciate in May. This echoes a broader problem of what “bizonal” and “bicommunal” will mean in practice in the constitutional context of a newly reunified Cyprus.