The Blue Beret
February 2004

Let The Talks Resume!
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The Cyprus talks resumed at the Nicosia Conference Centre near the old Nicosia Airport in the UNPA at UNIFCYP headquarters, on 19 February. Both sides displayed amiable good will and a [businesslike spirit in what was] a very constructive initial session, according to the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Cyprus, Alvaro de Soto. After that inaugural meeting, the Greek Cypriot leader Tassos Papadopoulos and the Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash joined the Special Adviser in what Mr. de Soto described as a social encounter with the EU Enlargement Commissioner, Günter Verheugen. In Mr. de Soto’s words, Commissioner Verheugen took the opportunity to explain a little bit more about the European Commission’s role in support of the UN’s efforts.

Special Adviser de Soto and members of his good offices team had arrived back on the island on 17 February ready to roll up their sleeves in order to help the sides reach agreement so that a reunited Cyprus might enter the EU on 1 May next.

The two leaders plus delegations travelled to New York for a 10 February meeting with the Secretary-General and his advisers, designed to usher in the final phase of the Cyprus settlement process. After a marathon three-day session, on 13 February, the leaders agreed to a commissioner by the Secretary-General signifying their acceptance of a three-step approach, aimed at resolving the Cyprus problem and enabling a reunited island enter the European Union on 1 May.

In New York, the two sides also agreed that the EU would have a role providing technical input with regard to legal and economic aspects of the proposed settlement negotiations.

The two sides agreed that the talks would continue in the presence of the Secretary-General’s Good Offices team and Special Adviser de Soto from 19 February until 22 March. If, at that point, there were still unresolved issues, Turkey and Greece would join the two sides for a week in order to try and overcome the impasse. Only then, in the continuing absence of agreement, would the Secretary-General step in and exercise his role to finalise the plan.

The finalised text would be put to separate, simultaneous referenda in the north and in the south on 20 April. Its approval would allow Cyprus to join the European Union by 1 May.
On his arrival at Larnaca Airport, Special Adviser Alvaro de Soto told waiting media: “I can’t tell you how pleased I am to be back. I left without saying goodbye because I had the feeling that I would be back. I didn’t expect it to be 350 days later.

“I am very pleased in any case to be able to come here at the behest of the Secretary-General to try to help the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots finally come to terms on a text which would go to referendum and which would bring about a reunified Cyprus at last. So that is what I have come here to do, roll up my sleeves. There is a lot of work to do. It is not possible to underestimate the amount of work that there is to do. And there is however, a strong political determination that has been shown by the parties, as well as by Greece and by Turkey, as evidenced in the agreement reached early on Friday of last week. We hope that in the coming weeks, all will show the capacity to work and the continued political courage and vision and spirit of compromise that will be required in order to match the political determination already shown.”

In the ensuing Q & A session, he was asked what would happen if the Turkish Cypriots or the Greek Cypriots reject the agreement in the referendum, the Special Adviser told reporters at the airport: “Well obviously the decision at referendum time will be up to the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots and that is one that they will have to take, based on their consciences. The text of the agreement that must emerge will be a very complex and voluminous one. Luckily, no matter what changes may emerge from the process in the coming few weeks, it is largely well known and has been known for a year. So there are not likely to be great surprises. So what we are hoping for is that since it is going to be necessarily a compromise, and compromises usually don’t have many fans or enthusiasts, that the leaders who will continue to participate in this exercise will rise up to their responsibility of helping to explain how a compromise is necessary and indeed unavoidable in order to reach a settlement on Cyprus.”

Asked was he optimistic about the viable functionality of the plan, he replied: “I believe that we are either there or very close to it already in the plan that was submitted by the Secretary-General. What you have is a settlement that we believe can work because, of course, it is improvable. It can be improved like all works of man and woman, but it can work and it is an honourable solution as well.”

As to changes that might be expected or requested, de Soto said: “Well, whatever the parties can agree to. The impression was created somehow at the beginning of last year that we were somehow resistant to any changes at all in the plan. And that is why the Secretary-General has gone out of his way this time around to make it clear that if the two sides want changes, we will be looking very carefully at them and we will be there to lend our assistance in helping to build bridges and helping to create tradeoffs and we will look for all opportunities to do so. It’s up to them.”

The Special Adviser added that he hoped the two sides would agree to the changes and complete the text, “leaving no blanks”. Failing that, he said the SG would convene a meeting sometime in late March to resolve anything that remained, although, he noted, “we would strongly prefer that it not come to that.”

Once back in Nicosia, the reassembled Good Offices team were soon seen unpacking and settling back into their offices at the talks’ conference centre in the United Nation Protected Area.

Next day, amidst feverish preparations for the resumption of talks, Mr. de Soto and members of his team made calls on both leaders. Up at the UNPA, others were at work too as UNFICYP support staff (including military and police (UNCIVPOL and FMPU), and, on the civilian front, administrative and logistical personnel installed the last of the computers, reconnected phone lines and put the final touches to security and catering arrangements for the Good Offices team and the delegations.
On 19 February, the media approached from north and south, anxious to get good vantage points to cover the opening day of the resumed talks. First to arrive were the TV satellite vans and their technical crews, all of whom had to be there early in order to get a transmission “fix” to ensure that they would be able to broadcast the event live.

Well before the leaders’ arrival at 10:00 am, more than 100 members of the media were positioned on risers across from the entryway to the conference centre, cameras angled, notepads posed, pencils sharpened, questions polished and at the ready. Everyone was primed to witness and to comment. Everyone had their views.

So it was that at 10:00 am on 19 February, the flashing blue lights of UNFICYP escort vehicles signalled the arrival of the leaders as they swung into sight of the media and rolled up to the entryway in their limousines. First to arrive was the Turkish Cypriot team, including Mehmet Ali Talat and Serdar Denktash, led by Mr. Denktash, then the Greek Cypriot delegation led by Mr. Papadopoulos. Each side was greeted and escorted into the conference centre by a smiling Alvaro de Soto. Inside, Chief of Mission, acting SRSG Zbigniew Wlosowicz, added his welcome.

Then, after an initial exchange of courtesies and a brief pause for some official UNFICYP photography by UNFICYP Force Photographer MSGT. Martin Mrz, and the Blue Beret’s Miriam Taylor, the serious work got underway as the two sides sat across from one another, with Mr. de Soto and his team, along with the Chief of Mission, seated at the top of the rectangular table arrangement.
The leaders were still in session when EU Enlargement Commissioner Günter Verheugen arrived at the conference centre just after midday. Once the meeting broke up, Mr. de Soto led Mr. Papadopoulos and Mr. Denktash to his office, where the three of them were joined by the EU Commissioner in a round of light refreshments (tomato juice).

Before his departure, Commissioner Verheugen addressed the media outside. He said Brussels wanted to demonstrate its readiness to support the UN’s efforts by providing everything needed to help the UN make the process a success. A further reason for his visit was to discuss EU involvement in the process with the UN and the two leaders, since not only is the settlement of the conflict at stake “but also the preparation for membership” in the EU. He said was quite optimistic about helping the process along, given that “the whole exercise here is about democracy and rule of law and respect of human rights”.

For this reason, he had encouraged the leaders “to use the opportunity because we strongly feel that membership of a united Cyprus would be in the best interests of both communities”, he said.
Preparations are being made for a date for entry into force before the first of May. That is in less than two months. The leaders have agreed that they want to set an urgent matter to take in hand since the international federal government. This is an important matter, one for all – to make recommendations over Cyprus – and indeed from around the world – to make recommendations to the two leaders on a flag and anthem. The process of fixing the terms for a united Cyprus to form a new state, the Turkish Cypriot constituent state, will begin in the coming days to go through the trouble of renovating a house again and so on or selling it or exchanging it, whatever. Or because he or his property is inhabited by a person, who has not been able to leave these homes – which in today’s figures is about 120,000 people – will be able to go back in the areas that will become part of the Turkish Cypriot constituent state. On top of that, about 15,000 additional people would have the right to have their former homes in the Turkish Cypriot constituent state reinstated.

Didier Pfirter, the Legal Adviser to Mr. de Soto, and his core team. But then there is another meeting happening which has not been so much in the public eye. Parallel to the leaders’ meetings, several technical committees are meeting. Experts from each side work together with the experts, some of which have been seconded by the European Commission, to finalise federal laws and treaties, to improve and complete the plan and for a united Cyprus to go into the European Union on 1 May. Question 2. Do you think that we are going to be ready before 1 May?

Pfirter: Yes, we will do everything that is humanly possible to ensure that. This is not easy. There will certainly be some things which will need some improvisation after the entry into force of the settlement, because as you know, the settlement is designed to enter into force almost immediately after the referendum, and the first few days, people will need to use their skill of improvisation, which is the hallmark of the Fijian leaders. We are actually quite sure that things will be going well and smoothly.

We decided not to ask our own questions – so we went to ask some kids, young ladies and gentlemen, to give us their thoughts. So the questions we are going to ask are from these kids. Let me start.

Question 3. If you were a refugee who will not return to your home, what will be your answer be at the referendum?

Pfirter: It’s obviously not for me to say how any person should vote. However, we hope that all will have in mind the general interest shared by all, of reaching a settlement at last, and that all will bear in mind that it inevitably must be a compromise, which, while reasonable and honourable, cannot possibly accommodate all individual concerns. The question is really whether people want to seize the chance of peace and reunification for the sake of their country and their children.
If neither of these two cases apply, the owner may sell, exchange or lease the property to another person, but only if the property is not located in the area designated as a military zone. However, should he or she prefer reinstatement, and not to exercise any of the above mentioned rights, he or she may then be entitled to receive compensation for the value of the property. Compensation shall be from the owner of the property, from the federal government, or from some other party to which the owner may have sold or transferred the property. Compensation shall be in such a manner that the owner will not be entitled to any interest in the property or in the proceeds from the sale of the property.

The compensation will be in the form of a mortgage, if the owner wants to sell the property, or in the form of a right to receive the compensation, if the owner wants to keep the property. The compensation will be calculated in such a manner that the owner will receive a payment for a mortgage, if they want to sell the property, or in the form of a right to receive the compensation, if the owner wants to keep the property.

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Pfirter: First I would like to note that there are at least two communities that are under the plan, and the range of demilitarisation

Question 14. What is the number of troops that are going to stay?

Pfirter: It is 6,000 until Turkey joins the

Question 15. A last question from us. There are so many people have concerns about the Annan Plan and want to know if there is going to be a slow and gradual approach after 40 years?

Pfirter: Yes, as I just said, it will actually

Question 16. What will the Greek Cypriots returning to the north be faced individually with Turkish Cypriots who are returning to the south?

Pfirter: The plan makes it very clear that individuals will not need to deal directly with each other on property issues. The property board will be the sole intermedia
diary on all dealings, including leases, sales etc. unless both sides wish to deal directly with each other.

Question 17. Will the 1960 guarantees system still be in place?

Pfirter: It will, and it will actually be considerably strengthened, namely by the inclusion of the constituent states into the scope of the system.
Pfirter on the Plan -- From the Kibris TV Interview

Question 14. Why are certain conditions proposed on the stationing and movement of guarantor troops?
Pfirter: The provision which excludes troops from being stationed in areas of territorial adjustment or between the Nicosia-Famagusta Highway and the current buffer zone provides for a suitable disengagement and assures the Turkish Cypriot side that the territorial adjustment will not have any strategic significance. The movement of troops is not actually limited, the plan merely provides for mutual information 72 hours before big movements as a confidence building measure. This is perfectly normal and common practice among e.g. member countries of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Question 15. There are allegations that the list of arms and military vehicles proposed by the UN for the guarantors to keep in Cyprus, is drawn up to favour the Greek Cypriot side. What do you have to say to that?
Pfirter: These allegations are unfounded. In the first place, it should be noted that the Greek Cypriot National Guard is to be dismantled and its arms are to leave the island. The initial plan of the Secretary-General contained blanks on these issues to be filled by Greece and Turkey in mutual agreement. Unfortunately they were unable to do so. In the third plan the UN made suggestions to fill in the blanks. The figures chosen were standard figures; we had no detailed technical information from either side. We do not expect that these technical details would pose a problem in finalising agreement.

Question 16. Again there are allegations that the map drawn up by the Greek General Staff, keeping in mind a possible attack on the north. Could there be any truth to that?
Pfirter: Nothing could be further from the truth. There have never been any contacts on the map with the Greek General Staff, any military authority or indeed any Greek authorities. As I have already said, the provision which prevents Greek troops from being stationed in areas of territorial adjustment, makes the map irrelevant from a strategic point of view.

Question 17. How will the plan affect the people who came to north Cyprus from Turkey and settled here?
Pfirter: Anybody married to a Cypriot will automatically get citizenship. A further 45,000 people will get citizenship in a certain order of priority. Anybody who has grown up in Cyprus or stayed here for a long time should be covered by that number. Another roughly 15,000 people will get permanent residency and citizenship after some more years, depending on how long they have already stayed in Cyprus. Students and academic staff will be allowed to stay in Cyprus in unlimited numbers. Anybody who chooses to return to Turkey would get substantial assistance of no less than 10,000 Euros for a family of four.

Question 18. Does the plan have any provisions for overcoming the economic imbalance between the north and the south?
Pfirter: The Constitution says that the federal economic policy shall give special attention to the harmonisation of the two economies and the eradication of economic inequalities within the shortest possible time. There are several more specific provisions to safeguard the economic interests of the Turkish Cypriots, e.g. those who currently enjoy import licences or those who have bank accounts in foreign currency. The distribution of indirect taxes between the constituent states results in a net transfer of resources from the Greek Cypriot state to the Turkish Cypriot state of about £25 million or almost $50 million per year, according to Turkish Cypriot calculations. Most important of all are, however, the numerous EU programmes which are specifically designed to eradicate economic disparities. In addition to the regular programmes, the European Union has allocated a special fund of 200 million Euro to the Turkish Cypriot state. Finally, it should be noted that the tremendous and unspoilt touristic resources of the Turkish Cypriot state will allow it to rapidly catch up after a settlement.

Question 19. What sort of country does this plan envisage? What is the vision of this plan?
Pfirter: It envisages a country where Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots live essentially side by side as good neighbours in their own states and separately governing their own affairs, including most aspects of their daily lives. Towards the outside world and in the EU they would act together based on common agreement, since no decisions could be taken without substantial support from both constituent states and since both of them would have the same number of seats in the senate which has to pass all the laws and approve all the treaties. The federal government would not depend on the will of one person but on the collective will of a Presidential Council elected with substantial support from both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot Senators (at least two fifths from each side) and requiring votes from members from both constituent states for any decision.

The plan allows for a moderate and slow return of some Greek Cypriots to the Turkish Cypriot state but ensures that the Greek Cypriots cannot be more than one fifth of the population of that state. This ensures that the Turkish Cypriot identity of the Turkish Cypriot state will be ensured in the long run.