

Cyprus enjoys its fragile honeymoon

A political cartoon in my local paper nicely sums up the current situation in Cyprus. It shows a United Nations helicopter hovering over a May Day demonstration on the Mediterranean island with one occupant peering down and asking the other: "Are they Greek or Turkish?" "We are Cypriots," the crowd yells up at them. With the milk of human kindness whipping into a giant cream chantilly after the President of Northern Cyprus Rauf Denktaş unilaterally removed a more than quarter-of-a-century old barrier separating the North from the South, old grievances have been pushed to one side in a frenzy to kiss and make up.

Denktaş may have believed that the newly fraternising Greek and Turkish-Cypriot populations would prove his long held theory that the two sides are unable to live together. If so, he was way off track. Within two weeks of the borders opening up, more than 300,000 Greeks and Turks crossed over to the other side in an atmosphere of jubilation, tantamount only by mile long queues and passport checks. We shouldn't have to show our passports in our own country, many complained.

In northern Cyprus, Greek-Cypriots were broadly welcomed with open arms by the Turkish-Cypriot community, not least because they brought a huge injection of hard currency into the North's ailing economy - upwards of C£15 million. A decrepit kebab house near the Green Line did a roaring trade for the first time in decades, the coffee shops and restaurants around Kyrenia's harbour were full to overflowing, their owners hardly able to keep up with demand. Cigarette vendors were soon sold out, their wares grabbed by Greeks anxious to stock up on the cheaper product, although sportsport Greek-Cypriot customs inspectors soon cottoned on to this trend.

But most of all, the Greek-Cypriots longed to re-visit their old schools, their neighbourhoods and villages, which the years had turned to misty outlines in their fading memories, and, of course, their old homes. To this end, those who found their houses still standing, tentatively knocked on their doors clutching yellowing deeds, often to be welcomed with genuine hugs and invited in to look around. Some were shocked to find their own furniture still in place, their wedding photographs tucked away on top of cupboards. Those who could not gain access for whatever reason contented themselves with picking flowers from their former gardens. Others held emotional reunions with childhood friends. A report in the Cyprus Mail illustrates the extent of the goodwill between the two communities.

Elada Kyriacou, a Greek Cypriot woman buried her jewellery in the garden of her northern Cyprus home in 1974 for safekeeping. Upon her return last week, she had little expectations of finding it but half-heartedly asked the new occupant Zerin Doam whether she had come across any heirlooms over the years. Imagine her delight when Doam explained that her children had found the valuables some 10 years before and she felt that a great weight had been lifted off her in being able to hand them back to their rightful owner. The Guardian talks of a Turkish Cypriot dentist who left a message on the front door asking any member of the Greek family who had once lived in his house to visit his surgery during working hours to collect the key.

In an effort to stave off possible tensions between the communities, most of the 35,000 Turkish soldiers stationed in the TRNC swapped their army uniforms for civvies and blended with the local crowds. But all was not as rosy. In one case, an elderly Turkish woman died of a heart attack when the former owners of her home knocked on the door. She had apparently feared that moment for a long time and believed that they had come to throw her out, although this was apparently far from being the case. Greek-Cypriots have also complained about treatment meted out by the British expatriate owners of their old homes.

Most refuse to open the door to them or shout at them to go away. "This is my property. I've invested £70,000," James Harrington, a British national, told The Times News Service. When he was asked what he would do if the Greek-Cypriot former owner of his house demanded its return, he said: "I'll tell them to get lost." Expatriates have long been warned of possible downside in buying inexpensive property in Northern Cyprus. In the absence of a political/legal framework, Greek-Cypriots could soon lose their euphoria at glimpsing their old homes, many of which were built by their fathers and grandfathers, and feel resentful that they are unable to repossess.

Reuters highlighted the story of two Greek-Cypriot sisters, whose father had been a priest. When the family fled northern Cyprus in 1974, he had been determined to stay inside his church. Upon their return to their village near Kyrenia, they discovered that the church was now a mosque and broke down in tears. The Imam tried to comfort them and returned their father's books and his Bible.

Turkish-Cypriots are, for their part, heading South in search of work and marvelling at the high standard of living, long enjoyed by residents of southern Cyprus, and destined to be even higher once the Greek part becomes a full participating member of the EU. The Turkish Cypriots are fed up of being marginalised and isolated, while they watch their Greek cousins benefit from the fruits of the 21st century. They are tired of high unemployment, an economy ever teetering on the brink, low wages and are crying out to be allowed to be part of the European Community.

The Greek Cypriots have long yearned for a unified island and especially access to the North, arguably the most beautiful part, and are eager to capitalise on a cheaper Turkish-Cypriot labour force. Once again, it is the politicians who are erecting obstacles where, perhaps, none exist. Kofi Annan's reunification plan is still on the table, although he is hesitant to pursue this further unless the main players - TRNC President Rauf Denktaş, Greek-Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish President, and Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis - can come to a broad-based agreement on the future shape of the island.

The Greek-Cypriot government appears to have been taken unawares by the new reality on the ground and is bemoaning the fact that Greeks are spending so much money in northern Cypriot hotels and restaurants, pointing out that it is illegal for Greek Cypriots to stay in hotels, which were once Greek-owned. It is also appealing to the patriotism of Greek-Cypriots and urging them not to travel to the North, an appeal, which is being largely ignored. Foreign tourists are also being prevented from staying in the North overnight, whereas Greek-Cypriots can stay for up to three days, a limit imposed by the Turkish-Cypriot authorities.

Signs that the honeymoon is about to experience, perhaps, a seven-week itch are emanating from the Turkish side too with Denktaş's announcement that his government intends to produce a blacklist of Greek-Cypriots following the attempted lynching of a Greek-Cypriot man during a visit to his old village, when he was accused of killing a fellow villager some 28 years before. Now that Turkey's relations with the U.S. have been seriously downgraded since its unwillingness to allow American troops to invade northern Iraq from its soil, Turkey is more than ever anxious to be a part of Europe. If it cannot manage to urge Denktaş to support the Annan reunification plan, or something approximating it, then its own chances of EU accession are slim. This is because once Cyprus joins the EU next year, Turkey will be viewed as the occupier of a member state.

During Erdogan's first visit as Prime Minister of Turkey to Cyprus last week, he said: "There are two peoples with different religions and languages, two separate democratic orders and two separate states in Cyprus. The solution efforts in Cyprus should be based on these realities." Although Erdogan has long been perceived as a dove when it comes to the reunification of Cyprus, this statement supports the vision of Denktaş, who would prefer Cyprus to be a loose federation of two different states, rather than one with a federal government made up of Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Erdogan also called for the lifting of "the inhumane embargoes to which the Turkish people of Cyprus have been subjected for 40 years."

This may sound perfectly sensible and from a pragmatic point of view it is, but it would require long-elusive international recognition of the TRNC with all the political pitfalls that would entail. The Turkish Prime Minister hopes that Cyprus will eventually become an "Island of Peace" but unless there is real political will to back up the goodwill shown by the Cypriot peoples, his hope will remain just that. It is expected in some quarters that Erdogan will show his commitment by withdrawing most of the Turkish troops currently based on the island.

There are rumours that Denktaş is ready for yet another surprise move, the downing of the fences around the now ghostly resort town of Famagusta. Like the Greek Cypriots, I would love to revisit my old (rented) home, which gave out onto an endless beach, and to relive old memories of long, lazy lunches on the terrace in the company of family and friends. I left behind no family portraits and neither buried gold. But golden, indeed, were those days before the coup and subsequent invasion, which I hope for the sake of the Cypriot people - all of them - will soon return. It's up to the politicians to ensure that they do.

M. East
Linda S. Heard
Feb 17-5-03