

AFTER THE REFERENDA: WHAT'S NEXT IN CYPRUS MAY 5, 2004

On May 5, Turkish Cypriot Prime Minister, H.E. Mehmet Ali Talat, discussed the recent referenda that failed to reunite the Turkish north and Greek south of Cyprus and its aftermath. A transcript of that session follows:

INTRODUCTION

BULENT ALIRIZA: Good morning. I would like to welcome all of you to CSIS and also to welcome His Excellency Mehmet Ali Talat, the Turkish Cypriot Prime Minister.

All of us have been recently focusing again on Cyprus, and had great hopes that after the referenda on April 24, the long-running Cyprus problem would be over. However, it did not work out that way. The yes vote in the north, a personal triumph for Prime Minister Talat, who recommended approval, unfortunately did not lead to the creation of the United Republic of Cyprus, which would have come into being on May 1, because the Greek Cypriots voted the other way. This created a difficult situation, with lots of domestic and international complications.

Prime Minister Talat had meetings in New York before coming to Washington with UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who put forward the peace plan that was submitted to referenda on April 24, and Secretary of State, Colin Powell, in order to discuss these very international complications.

Mr. Talat was born in Kyrenia and after his early education in Cyprus received his Master's degree in Electrical Engineering from the Middle East Technical University in Ankara in 1977. He was active in student politics as the first president of the Turkish Cypriot Student's Union in Ankara and continued his political activities in the Republican Turkish Party (RTP) after he returned to Cyprus. In 1994, he joined the Democrat Party - RTP coalition government as a minister from the outside as Minister of Education and Culture. In 1996, he rose to the chairmanship of the RTP and in 1998 was elected to the National Assembly. Following the success of the RTP in the December 2003 elections, in which the RTP won more seats than any other party, he formed the current coalition with the DP under his leadership. Needless to say, his tenure in office has been dominated by the negotiations on the UN peace plan.

MEHMET ALI TALAT: Thank you all for coming and special thanks to CSIS for inviting me and giving me this opportunity to address this distinguished audience. I will try to put forward my views and our position on the situation in Cyprus, as well as our demands from the international community and the United States of America.

First of all, I must underline the fact that coming to this point for Turkish Cypriots was not an easy struggle. In fact, it was very difficult. The decision of the Turkish Cypriots for supporting the peace plan of the Secretary General of the United Nations was

not a sporadic event or development, rather it was something that was created through a very decisive and heavy struggle. The Turkish Cypriot community has been on the streets, in big demonstrations, demanding a peaceful solution to the Cyprus problem and getting rid of the isolation.

European Union (EU) membership became a real motivation for Turkish Cypriots because they knew that with EU membership they would definitely join Europe and the world. Thus, grasping this opportunity and working for a solution to the protracted Cyprus problem has been a real incentive for the Turkish Cypriots, who, after all these efforts, had succeeded in the recent elections and changed the political climate in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). This was a great development and nobody was expecting this outcome. In addition, developments in Turkey, along with decisive efforts by the Turkish government for a solution, greatly contributed to this end.

The political change in TRNC and also the change of approach by Turkey to the Cyprus problem changed the whole climate. Until recently, the Greek Cypriots were not expecting this decisive path to be followed by the Turkish side. I asked my Greek Cypriot friends and politicians and their expectation was that at some point either the Turkish Cypriots, President Denktas for example, or Turkey, would somehow create difficulties, which would thwart the developments and collapse the peace process. But this did not happen. As I said, this time the Turkish side was very decisive. The Turkish government and the TRNC government pushed for a solution to reach a viable solution in Cyprus.

My government is comprised of two political parties. My party, the RTP, had a policy to solve the Cyprus problem and to create a peaceful island. The other party, the DP, as many of you know, was a party partly tied to President Denktas. However, due to the recent changes and developments, the DP came to a stage where it has strongly supported a solution to the Cyprus quandary. Altogether, our coalition government has worked harmoniously to find ways to persuade the Turkish Cypriots.

After the invitation by the Secretary General to New York, a long negotiation process took place and, during this phase, individuals, non-governmental organizations, trade unions and academics greatly contributed to the outcome. They worked very decisively and sometimes beyond human capacity. At the end, we reached the final plan, which was in fact a compromise. However, it was not a victory; it could not be a victory. Some people argued that it was a triumph for the TRNC but in fact it was not a victory, it was a compromise.

Turkish Cypriots had a lot of difficulties because of the structure of the plan. One third of Turkish Cypriots were going to be dislocated and were required to change their homes,

towns, and cities. These people were going to be rehabilitated but as everybody knows it is very difficult to accept and digest such a huge change. They were also going to leave their properties that they have been using for more than 30 years. Despite all these difficulties, they were the ones who voted 'yes' in the referendum. The majority of those people supported this plan since they would like to get rid of the isolation and to reunite with the world. Until recently, Turkish Cypriots were cut off from the world and they have had a lot of problems in their lives. For example, flight restrictions have been compelling us first to land in Istanbul and then go to Cyprus. This brings an extra cost and loss of time. Therefore, many tourists from around the world do not come to the north, which hurts our tourism and economy. Because of the decision of the European Court of Justice in 1994, Turkish Cypriots also cannot export their goods from their own ports. Particularly, for agriculture products, we have to get a health certificate from the government of Cyprus, which is in practice impossible. Another example of the isolation is that due to the FIFA ban, Turkish Cypriot soccer teams cannot play soccer games, even with Turkish teams.

We have worked very hard to bring Turkish Cypriots to this point. Now, we are very confident about the judgment of the international community. Before the referendum, the expectations of Turkish Cypriots were very high and they did not expect Greek Cypriots to act this way. In fact, the entire world, including all international organizations, assumed that the Greek Cypriots would not decline any solution proposal, particularly a solution prepared by the United Nations. They thought that if there were to be difficulties, it would come from the Turkish side. After the referendum, however, we got a clear 'yes' from the Turkish side and a clear 'no' from the Greek side. Thus, a very unexpected situation has been created.

There is an irony here: a community democratically voted and said 'no' to the peace plan, but was given the opportunity to enter the EU, while putting pressure on and preserving the isolation of the other community. This is a very unusual situation since in today's democratic world, a community or a country can decide only for herself. One community cannot decide on the fate of the other community. This is neither democratic nor humane. Unfortunately, this is what has happened in Cyprus. The Greek Cypriots declined the peace plan but were given the chance to join the EU. Although the Greek Cypriots voted 'no' to the peace plan, which was supported by the UN, the EU, the international community, and the US, Greek Cypriots have become the members of the EU. The same EU, however, excluded the other community, which said 'yes' to the plan.

Now, we expect the international community to do something to alleviate the difficulties of the Turkish Cypriots, not as a prize or reward, but just as a reality. Turkish Cypriots should not be excluded from the rest of the world. We do not demand the recognition of the TRNC. We only demand the removal of the isolation in order to give the chance to the Turkish Cypriots to join the world. We do not lose our vision for a solution and the reunification of the island, although we are not responsible for the current situation. We will keep this vision but this is of course not indefinite. Turkish Cypriots approved the peace plan with a clear vote and now they expect some improvements and moves from the international community.

In order to keep the Turkish Cypriots in Cyprus, it is imperative to get rid of the isolation and have normal economic activities in northern Cyprus. Otherwise, Turkish Cypriots who will

acquire EU citizenship will not stay in Cyprus since the continuation of the isolation does not allow the TRNC government to create jobs for the people. The government can only create jobs in the public service, which is not effective or economically efficient. Furthermore, there is no foreign direct investment and private enterprise in the north.

The European Union had offered 259 million euros to the Turkish side in the event of a yes/yes vote. Despite the fact that the peace plan had failed as a result of the 'no' vote in the south, the EU has decided to make these funds available for the Turkish Cypriots. With the continuation of isolation, however, this is not meaningful since we will not be able to make arrangements, investments and generate revenues and improve our economy. Under the current situation, this would be just an aid gesture to the Turkish Cypriots and, in fact, this is not a great amount for us. Turkey gives us around 300 million dollars every year, which is used to pay the salaries and make some infrastructure investments. In short, as long as the isolation and economic embargo continues in the north, we will not be able to use the money that will be given by the EU to flourish our economy. Therefore, we would like the EU and the US to help us directly and to remove this isolation as soon as possible. Given the ability of the US in taking quick decisions, we expect Washington to take steps in this direction, which, I think, would give an immediate boost to our economy.

To sum up, Turkish Cypriots have great expectations and strongly believe that this will happen soon. Everyday when I get in touch with my friends in the island, they keep asking "What is going on, do you have any concrete results from your contacts?" Perhaps not yet, but I have hopes that this will happen in the near future and Turkish Cypriots will get the support to survive. As I said, we would still like to see a peaceful solution in Cyprus and we have not lost our vision for a resolution. I also think that this is compatible with the will of the international community.