Address given by Günter Verheugen on the Cyprus problem (Brussels, 15 April 2004)

Caption: On 15 April 2004, in the run-up to the referendum due to be held in Cyprus on the reunification of the island, Günter Verheugen, European Commissioner for Enlargement, delivers an address in Brussels in which he emphasises the importance of the plan proposed by the United Nations for the unification of Cyprus.

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Günter Verheugen
Member of the European Commission responsible for Enlargement

Closer than ever

High-level preparatory Donors' Conference to support the comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus Problem (Brussels, 15 April 2004)

Introduction

Ministers, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to have the chance to welcome you today in Brussels. In only 15 days the EU will undergo the greatest enlargement in its history, drawing a line once and for all under the cold war and the hatred and divisions that once divided Europe. Only one crucial issue must be resolved if this historic event is to be a full success: the settlement of the Cyprus problem.

Unique situation

Today we are closer than ever before to finding a solution to the Cyprus question. The situation is unique: the finalized "Comprehensive Settlement of the Cyprus Problem" is being submitted on each side for approval at separate simultaneous referenda.

Let me take this opportunity to thank UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, his special adviser on Cyprus, Alvaro de Soto [who I would like to welcome explicitly] and his team for their unfailing efforts to bring about a solution to the Cyprus problem. The European Union has always supported these efforts. The Union has always been in favour of a solution based on the Annan Plan.

Annan Plan improved

The Annan Plan has been substantially improved during the latest round of talks, which started mid-February in Nicosia and ended two weeks ago in Switzerland. The improvements reflect many proposals put forward in the negotiations by the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. I would also like to mention the excellent co-operation between the UN and the European Commission.

I do not want to go into details about the Annan Plan at this stage; Alvaro de Soto will undertake this task. However, I would like to stress that the Annan Plan is in line with the fundamental principles on which the European Union is founded and that the viability and the economic sustainability have been strengthened. The finalized comprehensive settlement ensures that the United Cyprus Republic is able to speak with one voice in international fora and to fully participate in the EU's decision-making process, and that the acquis is properly applied and enforced on the island.

After decades of negotiations, there cannot be a miracle solution. We are aware of difficulties and worries that people do have. But my overall assessment is that the Annan Plan achieved a fair and balanced compromise. We would get rid of barbed wire, barrels and minefields. The Cypriots will move freely over the whole island, many will return to their former houses. The permanent division of Cyprus will come to an end.

In contrast, the absence of a solution would damage everyone: it would not only destroy the hope of many Cypriots. The status quo would deepen the island's division and the dividing line would become de-facto an external EU border. I have to inform you that in case of no solution a regulation would define the terms under which EU law would apply to the dividing line.

International support to be demonstrated

Therefore, the Annan Plan needs our full support and the Cypriots need our solidarity. The Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots have indicated that they will be looking to the international community for assistance in implementing the settlement. It is important for the international community to demonstrate to the people of Cyprus that it will provide concrete support for the implementation of the settlement.

Already in February last year I promised that the Commission would organise an international donors' conference. Our preparatory meeting today should allow potential donors and other stakeholders to discuss the financial needs involved in a settlement with a focus on re-housing. It should be ensured that the necessary initial support is in place from the moment the Annan Plan enters into force. The real pledging donors' conference would take place later in the year once all issues are clarified.

The European Union has already foreseen to provide considerable financial support as soon as a settlement is reached. It has designated an amount of € 259 million for the Turkish Cypriot constituent state once a settlement is reached. The Greek Cypriot constituent state will receive an extra € 43 million. However, this financial support will be aimed at overcoming economic disparities on the island.

Decision of the Cypriot people

The ultimate decision lies now with the people themselves. The people will decide on the future of Cyprus. Of course, we will accept the outcome of this democratic process.

However, I urgently appeal to the Cypriots to carefully and objectively evaluate the situation on the island without prejudice and without emotions. The question in the next days will not be "This solution or another solution", but it will be "This solution or no solution at all for a very long time". The plan on the table is the best and most balanced solution that could be reached.

Concluding remarks

Let me conclude by expressing the wish that our conference today will allow to underline once more our solidarity to the Cypriot people and give a clear signal of our hope that the Cypriots will now seize this unique opportunity. Then the island would overcome the damaging status quo and a reunited island would join the European Union on 1 May, which has always been our strong preference.

Thank you.