

Bilirakis Commemorates the 33rd Anniversary of the Turkish Invasion of Cyprus

WASHINGTON -- Last night, U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.), member of House Foreign Affairs Committee and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Hellenic Issues, delivered the following remarks on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives to commemorate the 33rd anniversary of the invasion of Cyprus by Turkish military forces.

July 20, 2007

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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Mr. Speaker, I rise today not only as a privileged member of this body, but particularly as a Member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and Co-Chair of the Congressional Caucus on Hellenic Issues.

I stand before you today to recall an anniversary that has racked the Cypriot and Hellenic communities for the past 33 years.

Mr. Speaker, even though the tragic events of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus took place so long ago, the pain and suffering of this tragic occasion still ripples throughout the Greek and Cypriot communities.

This anniversary is a time for America to solemnly remember the Turkish military invasion of the Island of Cyprus, to mourn those who lost their lives, and to condemn the continued occupation.

On July 20, 1974, in blatant violation of international law, Turkey violently invaded Cyprus and captured the northern part of the island. As a result of the invasion, approximately 5,000 Cypriots were killed and more than 1,400 Greek Cypriots, including four Americans of Cypriot descent, who still remain missing.

Since the invasion, Turkey has established a heavily-armed military occupation that continues to control nearly 40 percent of Cyprus. Forced expulsions of Greek Cypriots on the occupied land, have left more than 160,000 displaced persons.

Another tragic result of this 33 year occupation is the divisions among Greek

and Turkish Cypriots, who since have forcibly lived their lives separated along ethnic lines. This cracking of the Cypriot nation is a crime against society and the people of Cyprus that can only be resolved by ending this occupation.

Since the invasion, international governing bodies and human rights groups have condemned Turkey's flagrant abuse of international law and violation of Cyprus's national sovereignty. Mr. Speaker, 33-years is just too long.

The international community has helped shepherd a peace process and settlement that will unite the island, its people, institutions and economy. The United Nations Security Council, the European Union and the United States have all played key roles in trying to bring a practical and fair resolution of this 33-year nightmare.

On the occasion of this anniversary, America needs to take a long and hard look at its own commitment toward helping the Turkish-Cypriot crisis reach a lasting and enduring peace - free from occupation, division and oppression.

As a new member of the European Union, the Republic of Cyprus has proven a committed and influential partner in Europe. Despite having a large portion of its land illegally occupied, Cyprus's successful social and economic integration into the European community is a testament to its focus and dedication to democratic values and regional cooperation.

The Republic of Cyprus has also worked alongside its European neighbors to bring about a stronger integration of Turkish and Greek Cypriot interests for the good of the Island. This has included a partial-lifting on restrictions of movement across the cease-fire line that continues to forcibly divide Cyprus.

As a result, since April 2003, more than 13 million Greek and Turkish Cypriots have crossed without incident. Additionally, the per capita income of Turkish Cypriots has nearly tripled in the last three years because of an aggressive integration policy by the Republic of Cyprus and its European neighbors.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that because of this continued integration between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, and the economic and political successes that the Republic of Cyprus so readily wants to share with its neighbors, it is possible to bring closure to this 33-year occupation.

Indeed, on July 8, 2006, the President of the Republic of Cyprus Tassos Papadopoulos and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat agreed to formally begin consultations

with the ultimate aim of a peaceful reunification and an end to Turkey's military occupation.

Despite the early successes of what has since been known as the "July 8 Agreement," and the best efforts of the Cyprus government, the Turkish Cypriots have not followed through on their commitment to continue this dialogue and path toward peace.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, only last week, President Papadopoulos attempted to jumpstart the Island's reunification efforts and resume the July 8 Agreement process. Though he initially accepted this gesture, Turkish Cypriot leader Talat ended up cancelling the proposed meeting.

Mr. Speaker, the United States, and this Congress, should demonstrate its commitment and support for the July 8 Agreement as a way toward ending the Turkish-Cypriot divide on the Island of Cyprus. I have introduced legislation, H. Res. 405, which expresses strong support for the implementation of the July 8 Agreement.

I urge all of my colleagues to act and help this body put our own stamp of support on the July 8 process by supporting this resolution.

Cyprus has long been a strong and faithful ally of the United States. It continues to work with us in the Global War on Terrorism and has supported our efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Aside from providing over-flight rights and port access, the government of Cyprus has joined only a handful of nations who have acted on their commitment to cancel Iraq's outstanding debt.

Mr. Speaker, 33 years is long enough. It is not impossible to conceive one-day having a Cyprus that is unified under bi-zonal, bi-communal federation with a single sovereignty, single international personality and single citizenship with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all Cypriots.

America, a friend of the Cypriot people, owes it to them to do everything in their power to support peace and an end to this illegal occupation.

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