The Cyprus Problem and United Nations Peace-Keeping

Lecture at Harvard University, 15 December 1988

I am pleased and honoured to have this opportunity to address a knowledgeable and concerned audience such as you on “The Cyprus Problem and U.N. Peace-Keeping”. I appreciate the presence of all of you here this afternoon. It is a special pleasure for a cryptoacademic like myself to be back in this great place of learning and I recall with some nostalgia the year I spent, nearly three decades ago, as a Henry Fellow at the Harvard Law School’s International Legal Studies programme.

The all-embracing concern for us in Cyprus over the past several decades has been the Cyprus problem. It has gone through many phases over the years, from the pre-independence anti-colonial struggle for self-determination in the nineteen fifties, to its present grave dimensions of foreign invasion, occupation and massive violation of human rights since the Turkish invasion of 1974. Currently we are engaged, with constructive good will and determination, in high level inter-communal talks, under the auspices and in pursuance of the good offices of the United Nations Secretary-General, in an effort to reach an overall agreement within a target frame, June 1989.

What I propose to do is to give you an overview of the historical background of the Cyprus Problem and its present dimensions; touch on some other aspects of our present situation and policies; deal briefly with United Nations peace-keeping in relation to Cyprus; update you on current developments and prospects; and try to cover the rest of the topic in response to your questions.

Let me remind you that Cyprus, an island in the Eastern Mediterranean with a land area of 3,572 square miles and a population of 685,000 (of whom 80 per cent are Greek Cypriots, 18 per cent Turkish Cypriots, and the remainder small other minorities of Maronites, Armenians, and Latins), became independent on 16 August 1960, after 82 years of British colonial rule.

During our long, proud and turbulent history, stretching back to 6,000 B.C. – as part of the Hellenic world of antiquity, referred to in Homer as the birthplace of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty – conquerors came and
went, leaving behind some traces and monuments to mark their passing and adding to our already rich cultural heritage, but never altering the basic ethnic-nological character or the unity of the island.

The Turkish Cypriots arrived after Cyprus became, as was the case with all other countries in the region, part of the Ottoman Empire, following its conquest from the Venetians in 1571. They were interspersed throughout the island, living peacefully side by side with the majority Greek Cypriot community. With independence achieved in 1960, within the framework of the Nicosia Treaties (the Treaties of Establishment, Guarantee and Alliance), the Republic of Cyprus became an equal member of the United Nations, of the Commonwealth and of the Council of Europe and also joined several other international organisations.

At the end of 1963, internal constitutional difficulties arose and, following a proposal to amend some of the provisions of the 1960 Constitution and threats and acts of intervention by Turkey, the Cyprus Government applied to the U.N. Security Council seeking protection under the fundamental principle in article 2 (4) of the Charter which prohibits the threat or use of armed force by one State against another.

By March 1964, a U.N. peace-keeping force was dispatched, with the consent of the Cyprus Government, and a U.N. mediator was appointed to deal with the dispute which arose. The mediator (whom some of you may remember since he served as Ambassador to the United States and O.A.S. Secretary-General), Dr. Galo Plaza, former President of Ecuador, presented a judicious and balanced report in 1965. His recommendations were accepted by the Government of Cyprus but were rejected by Turkey. These included the maintenance of an independent unitary state, with appropriate guarantees for the human rights of the minorities and he described the compulsory shifting of populations as “a desperate step in the wrong direction”.

Time does not allow to go into details regarding the development of events prior to the 1974 invasion even though some of these events, such as the 1964 Johnson letter to Prime Minister Inonou and the Cyrus Vance Mission, would be of particular interest to you.

Suffice it to say that since the 1974 invasion, which was carried out through the use of American-supplied arms in violation of American laws and bilateral U.S.-Turkish agreements, Turkey has illegally maintained its occupation over nearly 40 per cent of the territory of Cyprus which contained some 70 per cent of the economic resources of the island. Through the forcible expulsion of two hundred thousand Greek Cypriots and the implantation into their homes and lands of Turkish Cypriots and of tens of thousands of colonizers from Anatolia (the figure of some 65,000 is our current estimate), Turkey has attempted to alter the age long demography of the island and to impose by force its own arbitrary prescription for a solution.