During 2005, the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) continued to monitor the cease-fire, sought to encourage the resumption of normal civilian activities in the buffer zone, and engaged in humanitarian activities. Although the overall situation in Cyprus remained stable, official contact between the parties has not resumed, and the Greek Cypriot side has decided to conduct military exercises for the first time in four years. Turkish forces are likely to conduct their own exercises in November. Meanwhile, in an effort to gain Greek Cypriot agreement with his 2003 settlement plan, the UN Secretary-General met with Turkish and Greek heads of state in May 2005 to discuss the possibility of resuming negotiations. It remains to be seen what impact the mission’s implementation of a new concept of operations, aimed at reducing its overall troop strength, ensuring greater mobility, and strengthening its civil affairs and civilian police component, will have on the security environment.

UNFICYP was established on 4 March 1964 to prevent further fighting between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities and to help maintain law and order. Following the resurgence of hostilities that led to Turkey’s military intervention and the establishment of a de facto cease-fire in 1974, its responsibilities were expanded to include supervision of the cease-fire, maintenance of a buffer zone, and engagement in humanitarian activities. In the absence of a political settlement on the underlying conflict, the Security Council has continually extended UNFICYP’s mandate in six-month intervals.

After the events of 1974, the Security Council requested the Secretary-General to use his good offices to find a formula for reunification of the island acceptable to both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. Various efforts in succeeding years foundered. An intensive effort was undertaken between 1999 and early 2003 by the Secretary-General’s envoy Alvaro de Soto, culminating in a comprehensive settlement proposal. In March 2003, the proposal was submitted to the parties by the Secretary-General. Although it did not prove possible to reach agreement at that time, talks resumed in early 2004 and simultaneous referenda were held. The settlement plan was approved by the Turkish Cypriot electorate but rejected by the Greek Cypriots.
In this evolving context, UNFICYP continues to fulfill its monitoring tasks by investigating hundreds of alleged cease-fire violations and buffer zone infringements each year. It typically responds by deploying troops, issuing verbal or written protests, and conducting follow-up action to ensure that the violation has been rectified. A new concept of operations was proposed in September 2004 and adopted in February 2005, increasing UNFICYP’s civilian police component from 45 to 69, and reducing its overall troop strength from 1,224 to 860. UNFICYP added a military observation group, but reduced the number of operational sites where it is deployed.

A joint review of UNFICYP carried out by the mission and UN headquarters in May 2005 revealed that the overall environment on the island was stable and the cease-fire line relatively calm. A decrease in the number of incidents in the mission signified that the strength reduction had not led to a deterioration of the security situation, but incidents in a few sensitive locations increased, particularly where Greek and Turkish Cypriots are in close proximity, such as Nicosia. Cited as a serious concern by UNFICYP, this surge in incidents in the buffer zone is a development that will be closely monitored in the coming months. The Turkish Cypriot side’s 19 May 2005 lifting of the restrictions that it had imposed on UNFICYP in July 2000 enabled the mission to restore its operational capabilities in and around the buffer zone.

Another function entrusted to UNFICYP is to encourage the resumption of normal civilian activity in the buffer zone. To this end, it facilitates farming, ensures a smooth supply of electricity and water, provides emergency medical services, and encourages bicommunal contacts. In cooperation with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNFICYP also discharges various humanitarian functions. Since the opening of the civilian passages in 2003, Greek and Turkish Cypriots have continued to cross to the north and south at significant rates, with few incidents of violence. The
absence of official contacts between the sides has highlighted the useful role UNFICYP plays in enabling the two parties to maintain contact. Sensitive humanitarian and other meetings occur under UN auspices, including some that involve political parties from the north and the south.

The process of accession to the European Union has served both to provide incentives in the peace process and to add further complexity to efforts to resolve the conflict between the two parties. On 1 May 2004, Cyprus acceded to the EU. While this development has had significant benefits, it has created new sources of tension associated with Turkey’s reluctance—in the absence of the comprehensive settlement—to formally recognize the Republic of Cyprus, as well as a surge in litigation in the European Court of Human Rights over property claims. These issues have increased tension between the two parties and made the possibility of developing a political solution that is acceptable to both parties appear more remote. Meanwhile, UNFICYP will continue to play its historical role of helping to maintain stability until such time as there is a resolution of the conflict.