

Cyprus

In July 2008, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed former Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer as his Special Adviser (SASG) on Cyprus. Mr. Downer's work is formally separate from the UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), which was launched in 1964. The SASG works alongside the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSR), Lisa Buttenheim, who has responsibility for UNFICYP.

Mr. Downer was appointed during a period of optimism about the readiness of Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders to resolve the conflict that has divided the island for decades. Beginning in March 2008, both sides accepted a series of limited steps meant to open the way for broader negotiations on a settlement, including the formation of working groups and technical committees to discuss issues ranging from governance to cultural affairs.

The Security Council approved the appointment of an SASG to help move talks forward. That July, Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders agreed to hold fully-fledged talks from September under the good offices of the Secretary-General. In 2008 and 2009, contacts between the two sides were frequent, with leaders meeting as often as once a week.

These meetings also involved Mr. Downer or Ms. Buttenheim's predecessor as SRSR Tayé-Brook Zerihoun. Downer's role in implementing the Secretary-General's good offices has extended well beyond direct dealing with the two sides. He has visited Greece and Turkey for talks on a number of occasions, and held discussions as far afield as Moscow and Beijing. The European Union has long supported the UN's efforts to assist Cyprus, and the European Commission appointed a liaison to the SASG's team.

Downer's team has also contributed to technical aspects of the talks by involving experts on issues like property rights to visit Cyprus and advise the parties. The UN has been at pains to underline that the talks are Cypriot-led, rather than an externally-driven process.

As of early 2010, Ban Ki-moon saw "considerable progress" in the talks. Nonetheless, discussions paused in the run-up to Turkish Cypriot elections in April 2010. Dervis Eroglu defeated Mehmet Ali Talat, one of the initiators of the 2008 process, in these polls. The talks reopened in May, and Eroglu raised the stakes by calling for a solution by the end of 2010 – creating additional interest in a report from the SASG on the situation in November. While Mr. Downer says he is cautiously satisfied by talks this year, thorny issues remain unresolved, especially around property rights. The SASG has insisted that the parties should "take time and get it right" rather than focus on deadlines.