Communiqué for Elders on Reconciliation, Reunification and Peace in Cyprus: An Inter-communal Civic Initiative

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The visit of Elders in December 2009 is coinciding with a critical moment in the negotiation process, which is gradually entering into its final crucial phase. The two leaders appear determined to move forward with a settlement, despite the inherent difficulties; the Elders’ visit can assist the process by encouraging the leaders to show courage and boldness so as to press on with an agreement as soon as possible. Unlike in 2004, where both process and outcome were in the end delegitimized as ’externally imposed’ and ‘not properly balanced’, this time the process is entirely owned and controlled by the two Cypriot leaders, who have agreed on the basic parameters, the procedure and are now engaged in serious negotiations to put end to the long-standing problem. Crucial is the facilitating role of the UN, under whose auspices the negotiations are taking place. Of course a resolution requires willingness by external factors to move in the same direction, particularly Turkey, whose military forces are present in the country, as well as other international actors historically involved, such as Greece and UK, as well as the permanent members of the UN SC. Moreover, the efforts to resolve the problem must utilise the increasingly important role of the EU, an organisation Cyprus is already a member of and Turkey aspires to join. All efforts must converge to push towards a speedy and comprehensive resolution acceptable to the two Cypriot sides.

In this sense, we consider the visit of the Elders as a great opportunity to express support to the efforts to resolve the problem, but also to play a more substantive role on the difficult questions relating to healing the wounds of the past through peace-building, truth-telling via the reconciliation processes. Moreover, they can take initiatives to encourage civil society dialogue across the divide, but also between the leaders and the international actors involved. In particular, we propose that the Elders’ intervention focuses on the following:

1. The Elders can assist in reclaiming the high moral ground on the necessity for compromise, as the supreme moral stance in providing a vision for future generations and legitimise compromise in the eyes of public opinion. The efforts of the forces opposing solution and reconciliation on both sides to generate an unfavourable political climate and to stigmatise the compromise as a ‘sell out’ or ‘betrayal’, to obscure the benefits of a solution by cultivating fear and attempting to usurp the moral high ground centered around justice arguments must be countered. The Elders can effectively intervene and illustrate how peace and compromise is the way forward drawing on other examples across the globe: in many other examples the same kind of issues were involved and similar sort of arguments were invoked. Of course all cases have their uniqueness and exceptional aspects, which must be taken into account; yet the commonalities are by far greater in the experiences of compromises. The solution sought in each case must be appropriate for the specific circumstances: the virtues of a federal arrangement, which, in the case of Cyprus, can only take the form of a
bizonal and bicommmunal arrangement based on political equality, a single sovereignty, international personality and citizenship must be fully supported. Fears over ‘workability’, ‘functionality’, ‘viability’ and ‘justice’ must be addressed, in spite of the fact that the details are still under examination, which makes such a task rather difficult. Nonetheless, the parameters are there and must be defended, for they form the pillars upon which the compromise settlement is being sought. These very foundations, first agreed upon in 1977 and evolved over time, must now be articulated in public discourses as meeting the internationally recognised democratic standards: the federation in Cyprus is a necessity and it is the moral choice for current generations who will perform their duty for the future generations to be raised within an environment of peace and prosperity.

2. The second issue relates to the need to change the political discourse of all actors to reflect the culture of peace and reconciliation that both leaders are said to seek and which is the necessary framework to the negotiations. The elders can play an effective role in providing hope and a positive vision to our people that a solution is necessary and at last possible. Crucial here is the role of the media, who have on the whole so far played a negative role: the media of each community have a one-sided approach to human rights violations of the past, as they persistently ignore the pain and suffering of the ‘other side’, and thereby perpetuate one-sided and distorted perspectives of historical events and their contribution in bringing about reconciliation and resolving the problem. Often on the same day on both sides of the barbed wire there are funerals and commemorations of missing persons whose remains have been located by the exhumation process; however in each community the media only present ‘their own’ victims, many times glorifying human trauma and thus falsifying historical accounts of individual lives wasted by the horror and violence of the bloody conflict, whilst totally ignoring the funeral of the victim and the pain and suffering of the ‘other side’. This is not conducive to reconciliation, healing or forgiveness. At last there are efforts by some media outlets and certain individual journalists to adopt a different approach but these are the exception rather than the rule.

3. The third issue relates directly to the difficult issue of truth-telling via reconciliation processes. As far as we are aware, this matter has not been touched in the negotiations: the question of the institutional framework designed to deal with the violent past crimes committed during the turbulent years of 1960-1974 must be dealt at the negotiations, as part of the compromise, even though (a) it may be tactically problematic to bring such an issue at this point; (b) it is recognised that effective reconciliation, forgiveness and healing can only really begin once a settlement has been agreed; and (c) the leaders may decide to postpone dealing with this matter after the settlement. Timing is of the essence here: whilst it is understandable that there may be some reluctance,
scepticism or even outright objections about opening up such an emotive and potentially harmful matter, as it may add another obstacle in reaching an agreement and obtaining the support of the people via a referendum, we consider that the subject cannot be bypassed. However, experience in Cyprus and other countries to date indicates that in general the more society begins to learn about the crimes committed against the other side, the more receptive to compromise it becomes. Dialogue is needed around the issue so that it is addressed in an orderly and agreed process.

- As regard the missing persons, it was agreed at the political level that this is a humanitarian issue and as such it should be left outside the ‘normal’ political process. The first step was to establish what happened to the missing persons and this is currently being dealt with via the exhumation process. Nevertheless, the issue does not end here; truth-seeking and truth-telling really begins once the remains of the missing are found. Hence the matter is not closed but is an open wound in society. Indeed, cases before the European Court of Human Rights illustrate that the matter is hardly closed with exhuming the remains of missing persons. This is a dramatic turn for the families of the missing persons, whose trauma does not end with the burial but continues until they find out the truth about the circumstances and who is responsible for the killings. In any case, truth-seeking and truth-telling has begun unofficially without any process agreed. The framework to deal with this issue, along with the broader issue of dealing with the past violent criminal acts, on individual, groups and institutional basis is a matter that needs to be discussed now, even if the final decision can be taken at a later stage. A discussion on dealing with crimes of the past may well alienate a lot of people (for those involved in committing such violations and their families) from endorsing a political solution; this is perhaps why the two leaders chose not to address this issue (through a technical committee) at this point.

- The issue of dealing with the regrettable violent past as a necessary step towards closure for those who have suffered for years and as a learning process for the future requires the intensification of dialogue at a technical level and drawing on examples from other countries. It is essential that the relatives of the missing and all those who have suffered are fully consulted and involved in the process. The leaders may decide that it is now expedient to begin the process by a mutual public apology, which will at least formally recognise that wrongs were committed, that this is regrettable and that it must never happen again.

- Despite civic initiatives and active citizens’ initiatives, the ‘official history’ taught at schools on both sides, fails to acknowledge the wrongs and suffering inflicted to the other side preferring to present the atrocities as the exclusive action of the other side at the expense of ‘us’. The education systems need to work together to bring about reconciliation. This is not happening at the moment: the T/C leadership decision to revert the content
old schools textbooks which contain chauvinistic elements, the continuing use of the similar types of textbooks by the G/Cs and the insistence of the majority of G/C teachers’ union (POED) to prevent T/C teachers and pupils to visit the schools must be seriously challenged. Educational reform must be supported.

4. To make the prospect of reconciliation sustainable we suggest that the Elders support in whatever way they can the formation of a civic initiative for reconciliation in Cyprus, which will promote the reconciliation agenda on both communities. This initiative will be inter-communal, non-partisan and reflective of all shades of opinion and ideologies which seek a solution and reconciliation in Cyprus.