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Architects bridge diplomatic gap in Cyprus

By Jon Calame

NEW YORK - Without fanfare, the unthinkable is happening on Cyprus. Undeterred by the repeated failure of diplomatic efforts toward reconciliation between the Greek and Turkish communities, Cypriot professionals involved with cultural heritage conservation have been trying their hand at peace-building. It may be working.

Following centuries of tolerance, tensions between Greek and Turkish communities in Cyprus grew in the 1950s and erupted into interethnic violence during the early 1960s. By 1974, a military invasion by Turkey brought a partition of the island. Physical and seemingly permanent, a United Nations-monitored "Green Line" still splits the country into two parts, with very limited movement across it. Last week, citizens were allowed to cross the Green Line for the first time in decades, as restrictions on movement were eased by politicians in the north hoping to appease a population restless for positive change. While encouraging, the move reflects only superficial reform. A full solution for the "Cyprus problem" has been one of the most elusive and sought-after diplomatic objectives of recent decades.

Last December, the EU's accession summit in Copenhagen came and went without a major breakthrough for Cyprus. Now, for all intents and purposes, "Cyprus" means Greek Cyprus, comprising about two-thirds of the southern part of the island. Turkish Cyprus just became even more ghostly, and its future frighteningly murky. Totally dependent on Turkish subsidies and military protection, it is Turkish Cyprus that most urgently needs a lifeline.

It is widely acknowledged that the political mistrust still plaguing high-level exchanges is a poor reflection of average citizens' desire for normalization of domestic relations, reconciliation, and access to former homes or places of worship.

But for the past two years, determined architectural conservators from the north and south have bridged the Green Line in order to prove that cooperation is possible. Armed only with chisels, microscopes, and laptops, they are collaborating on the simultaneous physical restoration of two orphaned religious monuments: Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque in the Greek Cypriot south, and the Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Turkish Cypriot-controlled north. Each had been an important pilgrimage destination for Cypriots until the 1974 partition, which left each stranded on the "wrong" side of the island and cut off from the thousands of pilgrims who still yearn to visit.

Since then, both shrines of such enormous local importance have suffered from neglect. Amid repeated crises and disappointments in the political realm, it is modest, low-profile bicomunal efforts like the church-mosque conservation project, that are routinely bringing Turkish and Greek Cypriots together to achieve practical goals. Their successes and methods fall below the radar of most international negotiators concerned with Cyprus. But the lessons they offer for sound reconciliation policy are legion: The value of remaining small, inconspicuous, and apolitical surely is among them. Where high-profile diplomacy has routinely stumbled in Cyprus, these new forms of "heritage diplomacy" are succeeding.

The positive dividends of programs like this may be measured far beyond Cyprus's shores. Though

other Middle Eastern affairs have claimed the world's attention for the moment, the relatively obscure subject of Cyprus's status within the European Union - as emblem of intractable strife or transcendent cooperation - will have disproportionately broad and lasting international repercussions. The Pentagon and World Trade Center disasters - to say nothing of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Old Bridge of Mostar, or the Temple Mount in Jerusalem - prove that symbolic places remain attractive targets for violent retribution. In Cyprus, this deadly equation has been effectively reversed. Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and the Apostolos Andreas Monastery are icons that illustrate clearly Cyprus's multicultural history. Linking their renewal to diplomacy may bring Cyprus, along with its neighbors, dividends of social reconciliation and lasting reunification.

The physical restoration of the monastery and mosque is unfolding with guidance and financial support from assorted UN agencies and the US government, but under the auspices of Cypriot religious authorities. Similar bicomunal efforts address issues of disease control, search and rescue, disaster preparedness, water and sewerage, and urban planning.

Unglamorous and otherwise unremarkable, the fact that these ongoing initiatives are undertaken cooperatively debunks the myth of frozen, intractable hatreds that has characterized popular perceptions of Cyprus for more than a generation. If direct results are the measure of diplomatic progress, then these small, firm steps toward social reconciliation should resonate as far as Athens, Ankara, and Washington.

• *Jon Calame is a specialist in cultural heritage conservation who received support from the US Embassy in Cyprus to research the joint conservation of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and the Apostolos Andreas Monastery.*

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