

CHAIRMAN ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN
Remarks for the American Hellenic Institute screening of the film:
“Cyprus Divided: A U.S. Foreign Policy Failure”
Friday, February 10, 2012; 6:30 PM; Archimedean Academy Ampitheater

It is a pleasure to be with you tonight as we remember the ongoing conflict, division and illegal occupation of Cyprus that began almost four decades ago.

On the morning of July 20, 1974, Cypriot citizens awoke to the bombardment of artillery fire and the invasion of their country by thousands of heavily armed Turkish troops.

This overwhelming military force spread throughout northern Cyprus, methodically driving out Greek-Cypriots, who were the overwhelming majority of the population.

Antonis Antoniou [An –TOE-nis An-TOE- New], who was five years old at the time of the invasion, recalled his impressions for the BBC:

“I remember the sound of the airplanes and bombs. The fear, the pain and cries of women and children running to save their life...My family was forced out of their land just because they were Greek-Cypriots. I spent my early years in tents and refugee camps. We had no food and had to stand in line for UN aid...We had a family, a life and a house and one morning we woke up hungry and scared in some olive tree field.”

As a result of this invasion, thousands of Greek-Cypriots were killed; sixteen hundred were reported missing; and over two hundred thousand were forcibly expelled from their homes and driven into exile.

Those innocent refugees still cannot return to their homes because of the continued occupation by the Turkish military.

Unfortunately, the chances that Greek-Cypriots will ever be able to return under a reunification agreement diminish each day, as illegal immigrants from Turkey continue to flood into northern Cyprus each year.

Many claim that they are encouraged by the Turkish government, in an apparent strategy to gain a demographic advantage for Turkish-Cypriots in any future territorial agreement.

In fact, reports show that since 1974, more than 160,000 immigrants from Turkey have settled in the occupied territory and now outnumber the native-born Turkish-Cypriots by two to one.

As the Greek-Cypriots wait for the day when such an agreement may be reached, the homeland they once knew is slowly being transformed by neglect and, at times, intentional destruction.

Under the Turkish occupation, hundreds of religious and cultural sites have been desecrated.

Icons, manuscripts, frescoes and mosaics have been looted from Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Catholic, Maronite and Jewish religious sites in northern Cyprus, and over five hundred Orthodox churches or chapels have been demolished or vandalized.

Seventy-seven churches have even been converted into mosques, twenty-eight churches are being used by the Turkish military as hospitals or camps, and thirteen churches have been turned into barns.

In addition, under the restrictions imposed on them by a foreign occupation force, worshippers are often prevented from travelling to religious sites in the northern occupied territory, and religious services are frequently disrupted.

In just one example, in the middle of the Christmas morning Church service in occupied northern Cyprus, so-called Turkish-Cypriot “police officers” entered and ordered the priest to stop the service, then forced the priest and those attending the service out of the Church before they proceeded to lock the doors.

This type of intimidation and repression of religious freedoms is unacceptable and it must end.

That is why it is important that films such as you will see tonight remind us of the continued presence of foreign forces on the island and the violence and division that has resulted.

I understand the suffering of these refugees because I, too, am a refugee.

My family was forced to flee the tyranny of Castro's communist rule half a century ago, and I am still waiting for the day when I can return to what has become a devastated country.

So I know from my own experience what is at stake if we in this country fail to support the Greek-Cypriots in their struggle.

That is why I have long insisted that the U.S.:

- Strongly support the reunification efforts on Cyprus;
- Press Turkey to end its provocative acts toward Cyprus;
- Urge Turkey to publically support the negotiations and end its disruptive interference; and
- Most importantly, to unequivocally state that Turkey must immediately and permanently withdraw its occupation force from Cyprus.

I am pleased to say that in the State Authorization bill which passed the Foreign Affairs Committee last July, I was able to include a provision that calls upon the U.S. to continue to support the reunification efforts on Cyprus and requires the State Department to report to Congress every 3 months on its progress.

This will allow Congress to take a stronger role in ensuring that the State Department is positively engaged and that all U.S. programs are supporting the reunification efforts.

I have repeatedly urged the Administration to use every opportunity to press Turkish officials to support this process, especially by withdrawing its forces from Cyprus.

I have done so myself in my meetings with Turkish officials.

In January, I traveled to Turkey with Majority Leader Eric Cantor, where I raised the issue of Turkey's continued interference and occupation of Cyprus in meetings with the Turkish President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

I can tell you that those meetings were quite heated as I and the other members pressed hard to make certain that those officials understood that the U.S. Congress was committed to bringing about a just resolution of the division of the island.

In fact, just yesterday I met again with the Turkish Foreign Minister and delivered the same strong message.

As you can imagine, he was not exactly thrilled to hear me again on this issue, especially when I used the word "occupation".

But I am determined to continue to press him and every Turkish official I meet with until they understand that the U.S. will not abandon Cyprus and will continue to make it an issue in U.S.-Turkish relations until there is a just settlement.

Let me end by saying that I will continue to do all that I can to ensure that the U.S. government uses its enormous influence to support the reunification efforts, until the people of Cyprus can finally live in a country that is whole, free and at peace.