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Aging Cypriot Rivals to Begin Talks to End Ethnic Dispute

By DOUGLAS FRANTZ

NICOSIA, Cyprus, Jan. 15 — Two aging political leaders will sit down across a table from each other Wednesday to begin negotiations that will most likely decide their places in history and the future of the divided island they uneasily share.

President Glafcos Clerides, 82, the leader of the Greek Cypriots, and his Turkish Cypriot counterpart, Rauf Denktash, 77, have been rivals for half a century, locked in an ethnic dispute with reverberations far beyond this island in the eastern Mediterranean.

Over time, the two men who were once friends have come to represent the stubborn animosities that have divided Cyprus since 1974, when Turkish troops invaded the northern third of the island after a brief Greek-inspired coup.

But finally, after four years of silence, a round of "dinner diplomacy" has opened the door for what observers think is a real chance to resolve the issues that have kept the two sides eyeball to eyeball across the cease-fire line that splits the island and makes Nicosia the world's last divided capital.

Time is running out in many ways. There is a looming deadline for joining the European Union. Greece, a member of the grouping, has threatened to block the admission of any new countries unless Cyprus is allowed in. Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit of Turkey, for his part, has threatened to "annex" northern Cyprus if the island joins without reunification.

Then there is the question of the Cypriot leaders' advancing years. Mr. Clerides has said he will not seek re-election in 2003, and there have been persistent reports that Mr. Denktash is in poor health. But no other leader on either side is believed to have enough public support to persuade their people to support a reunification agreement, which must be ratified by referendums in both communities. "I don't know whether it is now or never," a Western diplomat said, "but it is now or wait a very long time."

One who feels that the time may be ripe is Álvaro de Soto, the United Nations special representative in Cyprus, who will be host to the talks Wednesday at the organization's sprawling hilltop compound here. A seasoned negotiator not prone to overstatement, he said in an interview today that he saw "grounds for

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