

LETTER FROM NICOSIA *By James Travers*



Along the green line that has separated both Cyprus and Cypriots for more than a decade, paint is peeling on the United Nations' bright blue barriers and rust gnaws at the hoops of barbed wire.

■ On an unseasonably warm spring day, bouzouki music eddies quietly around a Greek Cypriot position while Turkish troopers swat flies and swap tales on the other side of no-man's land. A light breeze stirs the flags of the two armies and the six-nation UN peace-keeping force. Opponents lazily eye each other across a strip of land that measures four metres at its narrowest point.

In Sector Four, a seven-kilometre urban wasteland patrolled by Canadians since late 1974, guns and the wearying routine ensure the status quo.

"This is not a game," says Canadian Commander and UN Deputy Chief of Staff Dean Wellsman. "It's real. The bullets are real and the potential for trouble is always there."

But rarely does the grit that still rubs raw in the Cyprus wound lead to anything more serious than the hurling of rocks and insults across the buffer zone that gave the world the term 'green line.' A little more than two years ago a Greek soldier infuriated a Turk and was shot dead. The Canadians managed to defuse that crisis and today there is little sense that anyone wants to disturb the island's awkward but acceptable equilibrium.

So successful has the peace-keeping force been that 500,000 Greek and 150,000 Turkish

Cypriots have settled comfortably into their enclaves. Critics now question whether the 2,400-man force has not become just another institutionalized part of a problem that, since 1964, has brought 26,000 Canadians and every regular duty regiment here at least once.



The argument has its points. The force's presence has given Greek and Turkish Cypriots the luxury of intransigence while costing the United Nations and the contributing countries to date more than \$1.8 billion, a total that now rises by \$125 million annually.

Lack of progress and the cost to an institution facing a financial crisis have plagued UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar. He has seen his hopes of shaping peace-keeping into peace-making frustrated by leaders who are neither bold enough nor brave enough to push conservative constituencies into the compromises that are needed to reunite Cyprus.

De Cuellar's position is unenviable. He cannot bully either President Spyros Kyprianou or Rauf Denktas, leader of the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and he can't risk pulling the force out.

"If the peace-keeping force wasn't here it would break out into open warfare, like Beirut," UN spokesman Major Rod MacArthur said recently.

Another less conventional argument in favour of peace-keepers was inadvertently put forward by President Ronald Reagan when he ordered US forces into action against Libya.

But rarely does the grit... lead to anything more serious than the hurling of rocks and insults across the buffer zone that gave the world the term 'green line.'

The naval clashes in the Gulf of Sidra followed by the air-strikes against Tripoli and Benghazi sent waves of apprehension rolling across this island. Cyprus, with its open borders and mix of East and West, suddenly seemed more vulnerable to violence from without than that from within.

In what was said to be an attempt to prevent potential retaliation against Britons, Canadian troops were deployed around the British High Commission, located in the buffer zone. Here in the capital, US and other Western diplomats lay low and events that would have brought expatriates together were cancelled.

So far the threats of retaliation have proven empty. They did, however, demonstrate how much Cypriot concerns have changed since 1974, the year Turkish troops took control of the northern third of the island in the wake of a short-lived coup which had been backed by Greece. No Greek Cypriot ever forgets the events of 1974 and no Turkish Cypriot forgives what happened before that, but the fear that their island might again become a battlefield for warring foreign factions has pushed the internal conflict from the forefront of Cypriot concerns.

That is another luxury the United Nations has made affordable. The UN's highly visible and open-ended presence here has made the island's no-war, no-peace situation not only tolerable but almost normal.

Middle Eastern events are not such a comfortable fit. Living in the turbulent eastern Mediterranean, Cypriots must constantly take the measure of the tides of violence that rise and fall around them. And the high-water marks of those fluctuations somehow seem much more threatening than an incident on the green line or a new political gambit by one side or the other.

In the struggle between Arab and Jew, moderate and radical, there is no green line of fading barrels, barbed wire or flags and the sounds that it makes are not as pleasing to the ear as bouzouki music.

James Travers is Southam News' Middle East correspondent based in Nicosia, Cyprus.