

Greece to raise bank guarantee to E100,000

ATHENS, Greece: Greece promised Wednesday to extend bank-deposit guarantees and seek the punishment of banks caught spreading malicious rumors about competitors.

Finance Minister George Alogoskoufis said Greece will submit legislation to Parliament soon to increase its guarantee for bank deposits to E100,000 for three years to help build confidence in the banking system amid the world financial crisis.

The European Union agreed during a finance ministers' meeting in Luxembourg Tuesday to guarantee private savings of up to E50,000 (US\$68,160) for at least one year, in a measure of coordinated action against the crisis. The current EU minimum stands at E20,000 (US\$27,265).

Greece's government has already made a political commitment to guarantee all bank deposits, regardless of the amount, but Alogoskoufis said he would submit legislation to guarantee savings of E100,000 for three years.

"The legal minimum of E20,000 that exists now in Greece and in many other European countries will be increased to E100,000. This will happen very soon with a law that we are preparing to submit to Parliament," Alogoskoufis said in Athens Wednesday.

"I want to stress that beyond this legal initiative, our political commitment is still in force guaranteeing the full amount of de-

posits beyond the legal minimum."

Alogoskoufis reiterated that the Greek banking system is not at risk from the global financial crisis, but said the measures aim to calm jittery savers.

He noted that the EU decision was for the increased deposit guarantee to stay in effect for at least a year.

Greece's central bank governor, George Provopoulos, said the planned legislation — together with government pledges to guarantee all deposits — would stop a small leakage of deposits from small to larger banks.

Provopoulos warned that the Bank of Greece would notify judicial officials if it received formal complaints of commercial banks spreading malicious rumors to poach custom from their competitors.

"We have received anonymous complaints that ... some banks due to the excess zeal of their executives, or out of naivety or low cunning, are pushing depositors in their direction at the expense of other, smaller banks," Provopoulos said. "There have been such movements, luckily not on a large scale."

"Any complaints made on the record will be immediately forwarded to a prosecutor," he added. Provopoulos said Greece's banking system "remains fundamentally healthy, safe and stable."



Elders member Archbishop Desmond Tutu, right, talks with schoolchildren at the UN buffer zone in the divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus

World peacemakers offer support for Cyprus talks

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other international leaders voiced their support Wednesday for peace talks to reunify war-divided Cyprus.

Carter, Tutu and former Algerian foreign minister Lakhdar Brahimi were on a two-day visit to Cyprus as part of an organization known as The Elders, a group of 12 Nobel laureates and human rights activists who came together last year to help resolve global crises.

Greek Cypriot President Dimitris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat are to meet Friday for the fourth time since re-launching reunification talks last month.

"We've come to give encouragement to the initiative that we think have been very courageous steps," Tutu said at the disused Nicosia airport inside the UN-controlled buffer zone that splits the island.

Cyprus was divided into an internationally-recognized Greek Cypriot south and a breakaway Turkish Cypriot north in 1974, when Turkey invaded in response to a coup launched by Athens-backed supporters of uniting the island with Greece.

"We think it's a very exciting time, a propitious time, and we want to be able to tell the people that nowhere in the world do you really have what are intractable problems," Tutu said.

Carter stressed that their visit to the island was strictly to offer support.

"The overwhelming sense that all of us have is that this is a decision that must be made by the Cypriot people and no one from outside," he said.

The trio are to meet separately with the two leaders and United Nations envoy Alexander Downer.

Brahimi commended the leaders for committing themselves to reaching an accord, but stressed they are responsible for ensuring success.

"Having taking this decision you now have a very, very big responsibility to make it work," Brahimi said. "And the rest of the world I can assure you, prays and hopes that they will be successful."

Obama as Hercules!

SUPPORTERS IN GREECE UNVEIL COMMEMORATIVE COINS

It's undoubtedly a Herculean task, and the fact that a first-term US senator from Illinois apparently has a better than average chance of becoming America's first African-American president certainly hasn't escaped the attention of Greece's sizable expatriate American and Greek-American community.

In fact, approximately 150 Barack Obama supporters gathered in the Athens franchise of the ubiquitous Hard Rock Cafe last Friday evening to watch the tape-delayed debate between the "number twos" on the US presidential ballot, Sen. Joe Biden and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, Sen. John McCain's running mate.

In keeping with the ancient legacy of the host country and to the unabashed joy of local Obama campaign organizers, the hottest item on sale at the campaign stand was none other than the "Baracko": gold-, silver- and copper-plated commemorative coins supporting a likeness of Barack Obama as Hercules, complete with a lion's skin.

Located almost midway between two icons of Hellenic heritage, Greece's 19th century neo-classical Parliament building and the quintessence of "classical", the Parthenon atop the Acropolis, the touristy eatery on this evening was packed mostly with whooping and cheering Obama-Biden supporters instead of the usual assortment of out-of-town visitors.

In crediting the paternity of the "baracko", local Democrats Abroad vice-chair-

woman and Obama in Greece campaign head Yvette Jarvis — herself one of the most recognizable American ex-pats in Greece for more than two decades — says her friend Ann Papazoglou initially came up with the fundraising idea by comparing the Democratic candidate's campaign for the White House with mythical Her-

cules' epic "Twelve Labors".

Jarvis, a Brooklyn native and currently a special adviser to the Athens mayor on immigration issues, said support by Americans and Greeks alike for Obama is absolutely unprecedented, the same goes for interest by eligible citizens to register to vote. Although impossible to measure due to the mail-in absentee ballot process, estimates run as high as 100,000 eligible voters in Greece for US elections.

"Greeks, despite whatever so-called 'anti-Americanism', still believe in the American dream, and Barack Obama proves the point that they are not idiots to believe in this dream," said Brady Kiesling, a noted career US diplomat who resigned his post at the US embassy in Athens five years ago in protest to the Iraq war, while watching the debate on one of the two floors reserved by the Obama campaign for the evening.

Both Jarvis and Kiesling emphasized that the 2008 campaign has piqued the interest of US citizens in Greece who are usually indifferent to political developments an ocean away, noting that previous Democrats Abroad functions drew, at most, 50 people. With a smile, Jarvis proudly shows off a yearbook published by the Obama campaign, "50 states and Greece," she says, pointing to two photographs of Obama supporters posing in front of the Acropolis in April 2008, and two months later, waving to motorists from atop a cutting-edge pedestrian bridge built for the 2004 Athens Games.

