

Greek Cypriots' anger at 'biased' Downer

Before becoming special United Nations envoy to Cyprus, Australia's former foreign minister, Alexander Downer, enthusiastically declared he would "fix up" the "untidy" problem of reuniting Greeks and Turks on the island.

Almost 18 months later, with the dispute far from resolved, Mr Downer has discovered, like so many before him, the task is not so easy.

"We have a problem and it's called Downer," said Rikos Erotokritou, vice-president of Cyprus' small but hardline European Party. "It is our belief that he should step down.

"It is incredible that he still hasn't set up permanent residence in Cyprus. How can the negotiations be fruitful if he is here for a few days and then flies off?"

With the patrician aplomb that characterised his time as a Howard government minister, Mr Downer dismisses the censure, levelled mostly by Greek Cypriots, as "part of the political colour".

"Because this is a conflict situation there are always people who will have different views," he said in a phone interview from Cyprus' divided capital, Nicosia.

"Barely a day goes by without some difference of view being aired ... but as for the issue of being here all the time, I was employed on a part-time basis and I'm not paid full-time."



Alexander Downer (right) meets Cypriot President Dimitris Christofias. Photo: AP

Hostility towards Mr Downer, 57, peaked earlier this month, when he discovered how seriously a diplomatic faux pas is taken on the war-partitioned island.

The gaffe, for which Mr Downer has been squarely blamed, occurred when UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon flew in on a high-profile visit. Mr Ban had hoped his presence would re-energise the peace process.

Instead, the South Korean sparked a furore after unexpectedly agreeing, in a last-minute switch of venue, to meet Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat in his office rather than at his home.

The change was played down by Downer as having "no political significance".

"I didn't organise the change of venue so it has nothing to do with me," insisted the envoy, who splits his time between

Adelaide, where he co-runs a business consultancy, and Cyprus. "As an Australian I don't have any horse in this race." But for Greek Cypriots, deeply sensitive about any move that might be interpreted as bestowing international recognition on the breakaway Turkish-backed republic of northern Cyprus, it hasn't looked that way.

Despite Mr Downer's assurances, the "misstep" was seen as a deliberate ploy to boost Mr Talat's status ahead of the enclave's crucial "presidential" elections in April.

To ram their point home, the infuriated leaders of four Greek political parties boycotted a reception held in Mr Ban's honour.

"[Mr Downer] misled the Secretary-General on purpose because he is biased," Mr Erotokritou said. "He gives the impression that his only con-

cern is money and that he doesn't know his work."

Marios Garoyian, the Democratic Party leader, put it another way: "There is a Downer issue. It's not the first time he operates beyond his mandate [or] in a way which puts the Republic of Cyprus in a difficult position."

Long viewed as the Rubik's cube of diplomacy, Cyprus remains Europe's last partitioned state - and the only one where half of its ethnically divided population enjoys EU membership.

Since 1974, Greeks and Turks have faced each other down the barrel of a gun along a dividing, UN-patrolled ceasefire line.

They came close to reconciliation in 2004, but peace efforts collapsed when Greek Cypriots ultimately rejected a UN-brokered deal. Acknowledged only by Ankara, the Turkish Cypriots have since become more isolated in their rump "state".

With time inexorably cementing the island's division, the current talks are widely seen as the last chance for the unyielding foes to finally reunite in a bicomunal, bizonal federation. Inaugurating the negotiations only weeks after his departure from the hurly-burly of politics back home, Mr Downer called it an "historic day" for Cyprus.

But with little headway made, analysts are asking whether the Australian can now weather the storm.

"Downer's image here was never good, but after the Ban visit it has really suffered," said

Hubert Faustmann, a seasoned Cyprus watcher who teaches political science at Nicosia University. "What happened in the north was not only a huge blow for Greek Cypriots, it was highly offensive. He has lost a lot of points by being seen as the mastermind behind Ban's visit to the 'presidential' palace.

"Of course, no UN mediator ever gets a positive press in Cyprus," Faustmann added. "But Downer has not achieved popularity either. Greek Cypriots consider him ignorant and arrogant and there's a perception that he only wants a solution for his own glory."

But Mr Downer has some high-profile supporters, and last week they were rushing to his defence.

"This is not about Downer or his personality, it is all about people who are dead against the negotiations and the idea of Cyprus being a bicomunal, bizonal federation," the island's former president, George Vassiliou, told The Age. "He has been very badly treated by the opposition, but even if it were Obama in his position as co-ordinator of the talks, he'd be attacked, too."

Before flying back to Australia last weekend, Mr Downer conceded that cracking the Cyprus conundrum was "a massive challenge."

"It's a very, very tough issue," he said. "At times it can also be a geographic challenge, seeing that my wife and bits and pieces of my family are in Australia. But then, I wouldn't enjoy it so much if it were easy."

Article from The Age

Return of five rare Byzantine fresco-icons stolen in 1978

Five rare Byzantine hagiography frescoes stolen in 1978 from the Palaiopanagia Church in Steni, Evia, returned to Greece from Basle, Switzerland at dawn Thursday.

The priceless fresco-icons, dating from the 13th and 16th centuries, stolen by Greek antiquities smugglers from the church in August 1978 and illegally sent out of the country were traced by the Greek authorities (Athens Security Police Antiquities Smuggling unit) in 2006 to a well-known Italian antiquities dealer, at a gallery he ran jointly with his German wife in Basle.

The Greek judicial authorities launched legal procedures for the return of the precious icons, on behalf of the Greek state, which lasted more

than two years, instituting charges against the Italian antiquities dealer and all others involved, and sought the judicial assistance of the Swiss authorities for confiscation of the stolen icons. The Basle prosecutor's office in December 2009 issued a final judgement ordering the unconditional return of the frescoes to Greece.

The frescoes depict Saints Ermolaos, Nikitas, Makarios of Egypt and Nestor, and are unique examples of the school of painting prevalent in the 13th and 16th centuries on mainland Greece.

Palaiopanagia is a 12th century cross-shape roofed Byzantine church renowned for its exceptional art hagiographies that are distinguished for their precision of proportions and colors.

The five stolen frescoes are a point of



reference in international and Greek studies, outstanding among which is a 1971 study co-authored by the present Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, Ieronymos titled "Medieval Monuments of Evia", which has been award-

ed by the Academy of Athens.

The study, in fact, was a key factor in definitively identifying the frescoes and positively establishing before the Swiss authorities that the five icons are protected Greek cultural monuments.