Samaras wants to resolve Aegean Sea dipute with Turkey

Greece has the right to conduct energy exploration in its territorial waters, Prime Minister Antonis Samaras said, pledging to seek an amicable solution with Turkey on the matter when he visits there in early March.

Hydrocarbon deposits in the Aegean Sea can satisfy some of Europe's energy needs, Samaras said. He wants all nations to sign the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which allows maritime states to establish areas, known as Economic Exclusion Zones, that extend from the seabed to the surface and as far out as 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) from their territorial-waters limit.

"Greece has the right, by the Law of the Sea, to declare an EEZ whenever it wants," Samaras told an Athens news conference on Tuesday after meeting with French President Francois Hollande. "Together with Cyprus, we can play an even bigger role in the production of hydrocarbons to supply Europe from European sources."

Any move by Greece to try to establish an EEZ in the Aegean Sea may raise objections from Turkey, which refuses to sign the UN convention. The two governments have yet to agree on the size of their territorial waters or on the delimitation of the continental shelf between the countries. Several Greek islands in the eastern Aegean lie only 3 nautical miles from the Turkish coast.

"Greece is oriented toward friendship and cooperation with its neighbors," Samaras said. "We're making efforts in this direction, and in about 15 days I will visit neighboring Turkey, with other ministers, for high-level meetings."

Greece will lease two French frigates for oil and gas exploration in the Aegean, a government official told reporters Tuesday.

Greece not being pressured to fire 25,000 civil servants

"Recent press reports citing unnamed sources in Brussels and referring to an ultimatum by the European Commission for immediate dismissals of 25,000 Greek public sector workers are absolutely without foundation," said Simon O'Connor, spokesman for European Commission Vice President Olli Rehn.

Asked whether Greece needs to lay off public sector workers in order to secure the next sub-tranche from the bailout mechanism, O'Connor pointed out that "the commitments as regards the public sector work force are clearly set out in the updated memorandum of understanding (MoU)."

As part of moves to reduce the public sector work force by 150,000 by 2015 compared to the 2010 level, 25,000 government employees will be put in the mobility scheme in 2013 – of which half (i.e. 12,500) will be placed in the scheme in the first half of 2013, adds O'Connor.

As the MoU makes clear: «The government's mobility scheme, where transferred personnel can remain for up to one year with a reduced rate of pay (substituting for severance payments), while they seek new employment and are retrained, will help the transition across job positions, if necessary towards the private sector.»

In this context, the Eurogroup has set the following milestone for the March disbursement of EFSF assistance (cf Table 13, page 59 in the review report published in December 2012): «Complete the staffing plans for line ministries, use them to identify redundant positions and employees, and on this basis set quarterly targets of mandatory exits through end-2014.» Compliance with this requirement will be evaluated in the next review mission, which is due to get under way next week.

The European Commission also refers to page 157 of the troika report from last December. Mobility and exits, they say, as well as closure of entities and scrapping of redundant positions, will be pursued, and all affected employees will be either transferred to a mobility scheme or dismissed. Concerning those transferred to a mobility scheme, affected employees will be provided with one year of reduced pay. Brussels's target is to place 27,000 in this scheme by end-2013.

If they fail to find a new position in the public sector, they will be required to transition to the private sector. To facilitate the renewal of the public sector work force, the troika expects a large share of those entering this program to ultimately transition to the private sector, notably via mandatory exits.