

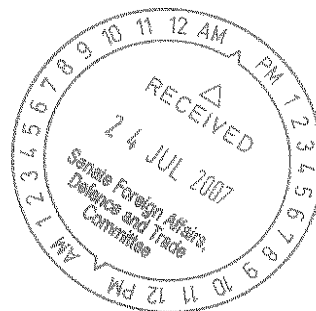


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Senator Marise Payne - Chair
The Senate
Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs
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Dear Senator Payne,

I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, on the matter of Australia's involvement in peacekeeping operations around the world.

There has been a long and constructive association of Australia with the UN peacekeeping operations in Cyprus. The Australian Contingent of AFP policemen, to serve under the civilian police contingent of UNFICYP, arrived in Cyprus in May 1964. A smaller contingent comprising 15 men continues to serve to this date.

It is my government's view that the long and substantial contribution of Australia to the UN peace process, in general terms through its diplomatic activity and in particular, through its support of civilian policing activity between the two communities in Cyprus, has been very beneficial and welcome indeed.

Australian policemen have been found to possess excellent skills and professional training of high calibre and were able to exercise their duties in a very efficient manner.

In the field, their impartiality coupled with ease of rapport with the local population, have gained the unquestionable respect from members of both communities and proved a

valuable asset for the Force.

At the operational level, there has been excellent cooperation with members of the Cyprus Police Force. Their high level of professionalism and commitment to the tasks at hand is reflected in the fact that no major incidents of disagreement or conflict with the Cyprus Police has been observed over their long period of service.

Indeed the symbol of the Australian Contingent, is well recognised all over Cyprus and expressions of thanks and appreciation from the public are not infrequent.

In addition to the cause of peace in Cyprus, the Australian presence on the island has contributed to the strengthening of the people to people contacts and the bonds of friendship between Cyprus and Australia, but also between Australia and other interested countries in the area.

Over the years hundreds of Australian policemen served one or more tours of duty on the island, taking the opportunity not only to contribute but also to enrich their own professional experience. Thousands of their relatives took the opportunity to visit the island and discover not only its beauty but also the fact of its tragic division.

The presence of the Australian force in Cyprus has been a rallying point for the Australian Cypriot community, which numbers, by some estimates, around 70000 people. Returned policemen continue personal friendships and social relationships with Cypriots who emigrated to Australia both before and after the Turkish invasion of 1974.

The UN Police Association of Australia maintains a keen interest in the activities of the Force, at the same time promoting the interests of those who have served on the Force in Cyprus. Thus the bonds of friendship and comradeship with Australian Cypriots continue to flourish.

It would be a serious omission not to mention that three policemen lost their lives on the soil of Cyprus. Two died in car accidents and one in the course of duty when his vehicle hit a landmine in the buffer zone in November 1974.

The Government of the Republic of Cyprus has expressed time and again its gratitude to the Australian Government and the members of the Force and their families for their sacrifices for the cause of peace in Cyprus. The fact that permanent peace and reunification has eluded us for so long in no way diminishes the great contribution of the Force towards this end.

The Government of Cyprus shares the disappointment in the fact that the Annan plan, put to a referendum in April, 2004 did not succeed to convince both communities of its

veracity as a vehicle for the reunification of the island. The plan was perceived to contain serious flaws that created insecurities, particularly in the Greek Cypriot Community. However efforts are continuing to arrive at a common base for the two communities to negotiate a new political compromise.

The accession of Cyprus to the European Union on 1 May, 2004, must not be seen as an opportunity to evade negotiations, but as an opportunity to seek compromises and solutions within a broader context, that would satisfy the apprehensions and interests of both communities.

The Agreement of July 8, 2006, reached between the leaders of the two communities, provides a basis to begin a new negotiating process.

President Papadopoulos's recent invitation to the Turkish Cypriot leader, Mr Mehmet Ali Talat for a meeting to kick-start the process, which had been originally accepted, can be expected to produce results soon, despite a temporary setback.

The UN Secretary General in his most recent report to the Security Council noted that the situation on the island still warrants the continuation of the presence of UNFICYP. This is especially true of the Civilian Police Force, which has been reinforced to enable it to cope with the increased load of work due to the tremendous increase in the volume of contacts between the two communities following the establishment of relative freedom of movement across the ceasefire line, since April 2003.

It is evident than in the absence of normal conditions on the island, (exacerbated by the presence of a large number of Turkish troops), the presence of UNFICYP and the civilian police within it, is essential. Australia's contribution has been of great value in the peace process and its continuation is greatly appreciated not only by Cyprus but also by the international Community. The fact that it gives Australia an opportunity to play a constructive role in a European theatre, can also be viewed as a positive element in its relations with Europe. It also gives Australia the opportunity to continue its constructive role within the UN framework as a compassionate, concerned world citizen.

In conclusion, Cyprus views the Australian involvement with police peace-keeping in Cyprus in very positive terms and hopes for its continuation.

Yours sincerely



Achilleas Antoniadis
High Commissioner