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Cyprus talks make progress

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NICOSIA, (CYPRUS), JAN. 16. The leaders of divided Cyprus underscored their determination to reach a settlement by agreeing on Wednesday on an intensive schedule for peace talks, a major step forward in efforts to reunite the ethnically split island. President Glafcos Clerides, the 82-year-old Greek Cypriot leader, and Turkish Cypriot leader, Rauf Denktash, 77, will meet on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 5 p.m. on the neutral ground of the abandoned Nicosia airport, U.N. Cyprus envoy, Alvaro de Soto, told reporters after their initial, 90-minute session on Wednesday. Mr. Clerides and Mr. Denktash had earlier agreed to talk without preconditions and to continue until a settlement is reached to end the 27-year-old split.

"We had a very good, very good meeting. Everything has gone very well," Mr. Denktash said in response to questions shouted by some of about 200 journalists who had been waiting for the two to emerge on Wednesday. Mr. Clerides, as is his habit, made no comment. "They had a very encouraging start and they began discussing substance right away,"

said Mr. Soto, who will continue to act as mediator. Upon his return to the Turkish Cypriot section of Cyprus after Wednesday's meeting, Mr. Denktash said the first of the regular meetings would be on Monday. "As of Monday we will discuss what our functions will be," he said. "Today, we discussed the general framework." Mr. Denktash had previously refused to negotiate until his breakaway state was recognized internationally.

He agreed to return to negotiations last month after his first meeting with Mr. Clerides in four years. Since then the two leaders have met several times, both breaking a decades-old taboo by crossing the Green Line dividing the island for dinner at each other's residence. The met on Wednesday under a U.N. flag in a conference hall at the airport in the U.N. buffer zone that has divided the island into a Greek Cypriot controlled south and a Turkish-occupied north since Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974 following a failed coup staged by supporters of union with Greece. —AP

THE HINDU

Sierra Leone civil war over

Lungi (Sierra Leone), Jan 19

THE GOVERNMENT and rebel leaders in Sierra Leone have declared that a decade-long civil war has ended, after they watched thousands of weapons burn on a ceremonial bonfire. "The war is over," said President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, who also announced the end of the wartime curfew on Friday. "Go and enjoy yourselves."

The ceremony rounded off months of work on a UN-brokered peace plan, under which more than 47,500 rebels and government militiamen have turned in their weapons. The war in the West African country, the worst place to live on earth according to a UN league, has horrified the world with its images of mutilated civilians, their hands and feet hacked off by fighters who were often children. Up to 50,000 people have been killed and thousands more wounded, raped or robbed.

Reuters

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10 Fiji coup rebels jailed

9/10/02
87% Fiji

SUVA, FEB. 19. Ten rebels who helped coup leader, George Speight, overthrow Fiji's first ethnic Indian-led government, were today jailed for 18 months to three years after treason charges were dropped for lesser kidnap charges.

Speight was sentenced to death on Monday after pleading guilty to treason for the racially-inspired 2000 coup but his sentence was within hours commuted to life in prison.

"I want to be through with all of this today," said High Court Judge Michael Scott in passing sentence on the 10 rebels.

Jimmy Speight, who stood by his brother armed with a machine gun during the coup, received three years jail, but other rebels received only 18 months in jail.

Two remaining rebels, who still face treason charges which carry a mandatory death sentence, have yet to enter a plea but lawyers involved in the case expect their charges to be reduced.

Speight and his armed nationalists stormed Parliament on May 19, 2000, and overthrew the then Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry, claiming ethnic Indians were undermining indigenous rights.

The military took over the country and, after the release of Mr. Chaudhry following a 56-day stand-off, Speight and his rebels were arrested.



Jimmy Speight, brother of the failed Fiji coup leader, George Speight, arrives at Suva prison after his appearance in court on Tuesday to begin a three-year sentence for his role in the coup. — Reuters

Fiji has been rocked by three coups since 1987, fuelled by a fear among indigenous Fijians that the economically powerful Indo-Fijians would gain political dominance.

Britain, which ruled Fiji at the time, brought ethnic Indians to the country in the late 1800s to cut sugar cane. Ethnic Indians now make up 44 percent of the 800,000 population.

Rabuka became Prime Minister after being pardoned for his two coups, which were also staged to stem Indo-Fijian political power. There have been calls for a matching pardon for

Speight. Senior government official Simione Kaitaini, the assistant works commissioner, called on Iloilo to set Speight free, the *Fiji Times* reported today.

"George was a product of circumstances and I respect his courage," Mr. Kaitaini said. "What he did was for the Fijian people."

Reaction among the Indo-Fijian community to the leniency shown to Speight was mixed today.

"The big people (Fijians) are still different from us, nothing has changed that," Ram Sundar,

an ethnic Indian taxi dispatcher in Suva said. "Things will be calm for a while, but maybe Speight should have been hung for what he did to Fiji."

The 1987 coups severely damaged Fiji's tourism-based economy and the 2000 overthrow saw a further wave of visitor cancellations — throwing thousands out of work.

Fiji was calm today with unarmed police patrolling the capital Suva, in contrast to the heavy security presence and roadblocks on Monday for Speight's court appearance.

Many in Fiji say Speight's surprise guilty plea was part of a deal to end any chance of uncovering who was really behind the coup.

He was arrested by the military government put in place after the coup but many say the coup's backers included powerful chiefs seeking, not only to strip Indians of political power, but also to tip the chiefly balance of power in their favour.

Speight is a commoner with little power in the traditional chiefly system which rules Fiji. The Council of Chiefs appoints the country's president and, in the wake of the coup, had a large say in who became prime minister.

"We would rate Speight number six in the (coup) pecking order," one prosecutor in the case, who declined to be identified, told Reuters. — Reuters

Speight gets a reprieve after death penalty

Suva, February 18

GEORGE SPEIGHT, the Fijian coup leader who stormed parliament with armed men in June 2000, was sentenced to death in the early hours of the morning but then had his sentence commuted to life in prison.

The Fijian president, Josefa Iloilo, signed a decree commuting the death sentence given to Speight to life, said the attorney general, Qoriniasi Bale.

The commutation came after Speight pleaded guilty in the high court to treason at the start of his trial in the capital, Suva.

The order reducing Speight's sentence "was signed by his excellency the president this afternoon. That is now the legal position," Bale said.

People sentenced to life in Fiji normally serve about 10 years in jail. Speight, an indigenous Fijian, led an armed overthrow in May 2000 of the country's first ethnic Indian premier, seizing parliament and taking the prime minister, the cabinet and other lawmakers hostage.

He said that he led the coup in order to win back political power for the indigenous people, who make up 51% of the country.

Sitting in the court dock, on what was to be the first day of his trial earlier today, Speight wept with his head bowed as Justice Michael Scott sentenced him to hang. "May the lord have mer-

cy on your soul," the judge said. Speight's wife, sitting behind him, wiped tears from her eyes.

Speight was found guilty of treason, which carries a mandatory death sentence. However, prosecutors and defence attorneys both requested the sentence be immediately commuted to life in prison.

The jury never heard the case and the judge formally entered a conviction against Speight following his guilty plea.

Speight's Australian attorney, Ron Cannon, said that he pleaded guilty in order to help close the country's ethnic wounds.

"This would then put the matter to rest and we hope will be accepted by the community as our contribution to the stability of the country and to reconciliation," Cannon said.

Ten of Speight's 12 accomplices also had treason charges against them reduced to less serious charges at a separate hearing today. They were charged with illegally detaining hostages during the 56-day standoff with the army. Coming into the court earlier today, Speight had looked calm.

He was wearing a traditional Fijian skirt, known as a sulu. He was "in very high spirits and looking forward to the start of the case," said his wife, Torika. With the armed takeover in 2000 came riots, arson, looting and the overthrow of the prime min-



George Speight is led away by two unidentified soldiers from the Fiji High Court in Suva on Monday.

ister, Mahendra Chaudhry. Chaudhry was the first prime minister from Fiji's ethnic Indian community, which makes up about 44% of the country and wields considerable economic and political power.

Speight and his supporters were later caught and charged with 13 "overt acts". The indictment accused them of forming an illegal "Taukei [indigenous Fijian] civilian government," and unlawfully trying to over-

turn the country's constitution.

They were also accused of killing a policeman before their armed rebellion ended, in late July 2000. Chaudhry, who leads the Fiji Labour party, said today that he was "relieved" the matter had ended.

Elections last year brought a new government led by Laisenia Qarase, an ethnic Fijian who supports parts of Speight's declared nationalist agenda.

The Guardian

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