

**ANKARA** — Turkey warned Lebanon and Egypt on Tuesday not to press ahead with oil and gas exploration deals they have signed with Cyprus, saying Turkey and Turkish Cypriots also had rights in the region.

Turkey was "determined to protect its rights and interests in the eastern Mediterranean and will not allow attempts to erode them," the Foreign Ministry of Turkey warned in a statement.

Lebanon and Cyprus on Jan. 17 signed an agreement for the demarcation of an undersea border to facilitate future oil and gas exploration between the two Mediterranean countries.

The seabed separating Lebanon and Cyprus, which has a width of 200 kilometers, or 125 miles, is thought to hold significant deposits of crude oil and natural gas. The Norwegian energy consulting company PGS recently began a three-dimensional seismic survey to determine the volume of exploitable hydrocarbon reserves off the coast of Lebanon.

The exclusive zone agreement is designed to mark the underwater areas where each country can carry out exploration and exploitation work once oil or gas is discovered.

A similar agreement signed between Egypt and Cyprus allowed for the joint exploitation of potential undersea oil and gas fields between the two countries.

Turkey and Greece came to the brink of war in early 1987 over a dispute over oil drilling rights in the Aegean Sea. A clash was averted after Turkey withdrew a seismic exploration ship and agreed not to test in contested waters if Greece did the same.

Any crisis over exploration rights between Turkey and Cyprus, a member of the European Union, could drag Greece into the dispute and further complicate Turkey's relations with the EU, which has agreed to slow down membership negotiations with Ankara over its refusal to open seaports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels and planes.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry said Lebanon had signed the deal despite assurances to Turkish leaders that it would not.

"Cyprus does not represent the whole of the island," the Turkish statement said. "Therefore laws on the issue enacted by the Greek Cypriot government or agreements made with other interested parties have no validity for us."

The island has been divided into a Greek Cypriot south — home of the internationally recognized government — and Turkish Cypriot north since the Turkish invasion of 1974, which was sparked by a coup supporting union of the island with Greece.

The Cypriot government said it would launch an international tender in February for offshore oil and gas exploration rights.

Foreign Minister George Lillikas said last week in response to protests from Turkish Cypriot officials that his country had the right to sign such deals with neighbors. The Turkish Cypriot leader, Mehmet Ali Talat, has said his people would not renounce oil and gas rights in the Mediterranean and warned of rising tensions if deposits were not jointly exploited by the two communities.