ISKELE, Cyprus: Turkey began its first exploratory oil and gas drilling in the breakaway Northern sector of the divided island of Cyprus Thursday, amid a dispute over rights to the island's minerals.

The news brought a quick response from the government of Cyprus, which labeled the action as illegal. Turkey's state-run Turkish Petroleum Corp. bored the first onshore probe in the village of Sygkrasi (Sinirustu) at a ceremony attended by Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz and Turkish Cypriot leader Dervis Eroglu.

"I am hopeful that the results will open up a new page for us in oil and gas production," Yildiz told reporters at the inauguration of the first such drilling in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Turkey.

Cypriot government spokesman Stefanos Stefanou said "Turkey and the Cyprus problem."

unwilling to make concessions.

BRIEFS

Berri calls for Lebanese unity amid regional unrest
BEIRUT: Speaker Nabih Berri said Thursday the turbulent region required that Lebanon boost its unity, civil peace and lay down a strategy for sustainable development. "Amid this turbulent and tense state of the region … Lebanon is always in need of strengthening the factors of its internal unity, enhancing its civil peace and agreeing on a strategic plan for sustainable development," Berri said during a ceremony to inaugurate the Faculty of Languages at Universite Saint Joseph which took place under his patronage. Berri added that such a plan should ensure continuity in public administrations. He welcomed the September visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Lebanon, saying it would make the Levant once again a space for partnership. The speaker stressed that democracy, freedom and good governance should be "a national production first." – The Daily Star