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News in brief

Strikers bring Athens to a halt in austerity budget protest

THOUSANDS of strikers marched through the Greek capital yesterday before parliament began debating the government's austerity budget, *writes Helena Smith in Athens.*

Civil servants, doctors and teachers walked off the job, joining strikes by Greek seamen and diplomats.

The protests plunged the

country further into crisis as it entered its third week of a farmers' rail and road blockade.

Bracing themselves for a showdown with the government, the farmers announced they would bring their self-proclaimed "holy war" against the tax-heavy budget to Athens with a demonstration outside parliament

tomorrow. "The government's got to understand that we're willing to stay here throughout the holidays," said a cotton grower guarding a roadblock outside Larissa, where the revolt is being coordinated. "We wouldn't be able to face our families if we returned to our villages empty-handed."

The blockade, which has

cut Greece in half, has wrought unprecedented damage to the economy, with losses of more than £442 million.

Farmers say the budget, an effort to cut the deficit linked to the planned European single currency, expected too many sacrifices from Greeks who have seen their disposable incomes drop in recent years.