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## WORLD NEWS 7

# Greek farmers dig in for a fight to the finish

Helena Smith in Athens

**G**REEK farmers who have left the country in chaos with their fortnight-long rail and road blockade rejected a government olive branch last night and dug in for indefinite warfare.

An emergency cabinet meeting failed to resolve the worst revolt in modern Greek history but announced that the prime minister, Costas Simitis, was willing to negotiate.

Mr Simitis insisted, however, that the farmers demand for billions of drachmas could not be met.

The farmers complain that the government's budget, designed to meet the European Union criteria for a single currency, is too stringent.

In a nationally televised address, Mr Simitis promised to sit down with the farmers and talk if they first removed the 100-plus blockades they have erected across the main and secondary roads and railways.

But the farmers, meeting at their headquarters in Larissa, immediately rejected the offer, described it as a "provocation" and vowed to continue the blockade "until the bitter end".

"The government has done nothing to meet our demands, and therefore we will not be withdrawing" said a statement by Thanassis Nasikas, a leading member of the farmers' committee.

"Our decision is that we will continue our struggle and call on more farmers to reinforce our blockades ... The premier hasn't figured out what's happening here."

As he spoke farmers were reported to be blocking the harbour of Aghios Nikolaos, about 125 miles west of Ath-

ens, to prevent lorries reaching the capital by sea from the already cut-off southern port of Patras.

Many of the farmers have described the blockade as a "holy war" they will fight to the end.

Innumerable lorries, including hundreds from Britain, have been trapped by the barricades, which have cut the country in half and sealed its international borders.

"I understand the problems of those working in the agricultural sector, who Pasok [the governing Socialist Party] has always supported, and the government is willing to discuss them," Mr Simitis said.

"But demands for billions [of drachmas] cannot be satisfied. To do so would be a step backwards. It would mean we would miss the targets we have set to enable Greece to play a role in the European Union."

The blockade has shut scores of northern factories and left many towns and cities short of food.

Yesterday the lorry drivers' union pleaded with the farmers to lift the siege, saying that thousands of foreign truckers were suffering severe hardship and had reached the point of despair.

With Greece braced for a barrage of public service strikes in the next 10 days, also in protest at the austerity programme, Mr Simitis avoided saying how he would lift the blockade if the farmers rejected his offer.

He has said he would rather his government fell than give into the farmers' demands.

Mr Nasikas said the farmers could mobilise thousands more to join the battle against the government's "criminal European Union budget" if they wanted to.