

Germany defiant over second world war massacre of villagers

Greek court orders Bonn to pay £20m reparations

Helena Smith in Athens

IGNORING protests from Bonn, thousands of Greeks insisted yesterday they would "fight" to get Germany to honour a court decision ordering it to provide compensation for crimes committed under the Nazi occupation.

In a landmark ruling, a court in the central Greek city of Livadia, said Germany should pay \$32 million (£20 million) in reparations to a village whose residents were butchered by a Waffen-SS unit in 1944. The slaughter of 218 men, women and children in Distomo is one of the worst atrocities of Nazi occupation of Greece.

Yiannis Stamoulis, the local governor who launched a campaign for compensation, said the verdict would encourage "hundreds of thousands" of Greeks to seek damages.

"The 35-page ruling was reached after 10 months of deliberation and reads like a doctorate. Its scientific argumentation cannot be denied or discounted even by Bonn," Mr Stamoulis, who is also a lawyer and former MEP, said. His district has about 3,100 claimants.

"It paves the way for victims in other parts of Greece to follow suit. I can assure you we will fight all the way," he said.

Greece suffered appallingly during the three years the swastika flew over the Acropolis. About 130,000 people were executed in different parts of the country, while about 300,000 more died of starvation. The ruins of villages that were pillaged and

Mr Stamoulis, now aged 65 and the governor of the town of Thiva, only narrowly escaped death himself when the Nazis began exacting "reprisals" in his home town during the war.

He said the lawsuits had been made possible by German unification and the end of the occupation of Germany by allied troops.

Bonn had two months to appeal against the verdict in

"As far as Germany is concerned, it settled them in 1960. It was up to the Greek government to distribute the compensation amongst the victims."

But Mr Stamoulis argues that there are exceptions to the rule that courts in one country do not have jurisdiction over those in another, and instances of war crimes are one, "as we all saw at Nuremberg".

Ian Traynor in Bonn adds: Although the government is keen to close the book on the matter of wartime reparations, having paid out around 100 billion marks (£36 billion pounds) worldwide since 1945, the issue will not lie down.

Jewish organisations were locked in negotiations in Bonn this week, seeking pensions for thousands of Holocaust survivors in eastern Europe who have been largely ignored in the post-war reparations.

A Bonn court is expected to issue a ruling next week in the case of former slave labourers forced to work in German industry under the Nazis who are now demanding compensation. If the court rules in their favour, it could open the floodgates to thousands of additional claims.

'The court's ruling paves the way for victims in other parts of Greece to follow suit. I assure you we will fight all the way'

burnt by Nazi soldiers still scar the landscape.

Greeks say that, unlike other occupied nations, they were never adequately compensated.

"In March 1960, Germany handed the Greek state the laughable amount of 115 million marks (£41 million) in reparations," Mr Stamoulis said. "But the pact stipulated very clearly that Greek individuals also had the right to file for claims. They never did because Greece was too poor to push the issue. Now things are better they want justice."

Athens or pay up, he said. "Otherwise we will take the case to the International Court at The Hague or the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg."

German officials dismissed the issue as moribund yesterday, saying that no court had jurisdiction over another country.

"The [Greek court's] decision violates international law," said Alexander Allardt, a government spokesman. "Bonn does not intend to meet the claims of the Greek village of Distomo."