

# Corfu arms against Albanian pirates

THE GUARDIAN 12.5.97 P 6.

Helena Smith in Athens

**G**ANGS of armed Albanian pirates, bent on smuggling drugs and weapons into Greece, are sending a chill through the resort island of Corfu.

The authorities have been on alert in recent weeks Greek areas bordering its lawless neighbour. But the Socialist government in Athens now says it will send crack troops to patrol Corfu's beaches.

After holding an emergency meeting on the crisis, the public order ministry announced that it would equip the island's coastguard with hi-tech speedboats to keep the mafiosi at bay, and the government said it would strengthen the 4,000-strong force by hiring hundreds more officers.

"They are hardened bands of mafiosi who operate like gangsters during the Prohibition era in the United States," the

merchant marine minister, Stavros Soumakis, said. "They are extremely dangerous."

This weekend an Albanian smuggler was shot dead in an exchange of fire with coastguard officers near the north-western port of Igoumenitsa, on mainland Greece. Police said the patrol boat had tried to catch the bandits in a sea chase. Earlier this month, a coastguard official was shot dead in a dawn raid on a marina.

Since Albania slipped into anarchy with the collapse of its fraudulent investment schemes in January, pirates armed with grenades and Kalashnikovs have taken to plundering Greek ports.

Officials estimate that nearly 200 speedboats have been stolen by bandits who use them to transport their booty. The narrowest point in the strait between Albania and Corfu is less than two miles wide.

Some people in Corfu are

reported to have started arming themselves with guns and axes in case of attack.

In Corfu's north-eastern region of Finali, the local mayor, Giorgos Mahlmmaris, has overseen a campaign to have beaches and marines patrolled by armed guards around the clock. The resort is a favourite with British tourists.

Highlighting its concern about the attacks, the Foreign Office has issued an advisory warning to Britons to stay away from Albania. British tourists not only top the league tables of arrivals on Corfu but form the island's largest resident foreign community, about 5,000 living there all year round.

"Given the close proximity of Albania to Corfu, great care should be taken by yachts and other boat owners sailing in the Corfu channel," the warning said. "Vessels should in particular keep well away from the Albanian coast



and stay overnight in harbours where boats can be guarded."

Last September a visiting British businessman was shot dead on his yacht in the middle of the night by suspected Albanian mobsters.

Greek police say boatloads of bandits have been seen

dumping crates of hashish and arms caches in isolated coves around Greece and Italy.

"They started off smuggling illegal refugees and have steadily progressed to other criminal activities," an officer on Corfu said. "People here are really terrorised."

More than 1 million assault rifles are believed to be in the hands of Albanian mafiosi, who ran amok looting armouries earlier this year. The Italian-led multinational force stationed in the country has so far failed to recover the weapons.

The same gangs are thought to control marijuana cultivation in southern Albania. Police believe the drugs and weapons are destined for European capitals. Since the collapse of communism, Albanians have emerged as a criminal force in Europe, allegedly collaborating with gangsters in Italy, Greece and Germany.