

Government crackdown follows fury over 'Albanian' crime wave

Helena Smith in Athens

GREECE ordered its entire 45,000-strong police force out on patrol yesterday to combat a record rise in crime that has included the murder of a retired British couple on the Ionian island of Cephalonia and a nationwide surge in violent robberies blamed on a new breed of Balkan gangster.

Among more than 500,000 migrants who have streamed into the country from poorer Balkan neighbours are hundreds of hardened criminals from Albania and Romania. Much of the violent surge has been blamed on ruthless Albanian "bandits" bent on smuggling drugs and weapons into the West.

This year armed robberies in Athens alone have soared by more than 300 per cent, with hit-and-run raids on pe-

destrians not far behind. Many incidents have involved hooded men with grenades shooting wildly into the air with sawn-off shotguns.

The Socialist government says all stops will now be pulled out. Desk-bound officers who have not been on the beat for years will have to join thousands of other police, including specially trained anti-terrorist units, in patrolling the streets. "No policeman will stay behind his desk," said the public order minister, George Romaos. "From now on every policeman will be out there patrolling day and night."

The case of two Albanian immigrants who admitted killing Roy and Judith Eccles with a butcher's knife and pitchfork on the island of Cephalonia has provoked unprecedented fury in a country that, until recently, was one of Europe's most peaceful.