

Olympic officials fly to Athens as Games schedule falls behind

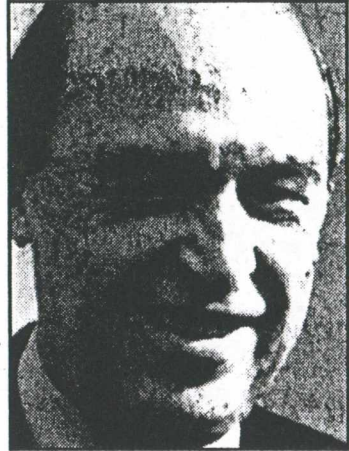
THE INDEPENDENT 22/11/2000 p 9

BY PAUL WOOD
in Athens

AN INSPECTION team from the International Olympic Committee arrives in Athens today, amid ringing declarations of confidence in Greece, for a visit that officials hope will drown out the infighting, squabbling and back-biting undermining preparations for 2004.

Amid considerable anxiety that Athens is dangerously behind schedule, Juan Antonio Samaranch, the IOC President, was forced to issue a fresh denial that the city might lose the Games. He said he was "very pleased" with what he called "very drastic changes" made by the organising committee. "We are confident. We are sure that the Games in Athens will be a big success."

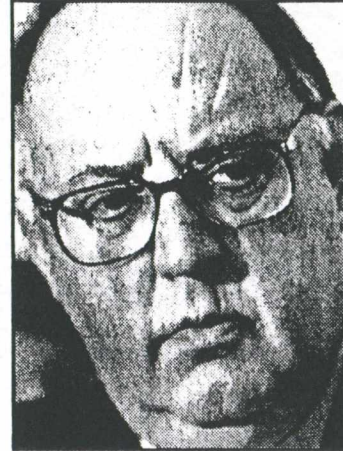
The Greek organisers have reacted with fury to criticism of their competence, but their plans have nevertheless been blown off course by resignations, delays in construction and the ongoing dispute with the IOC over the state of the Games.



Mr Simitis, left, objected to Mr Pangalos's outbursts

Not the least of the problems was the sacking this week of Theodoros Pangalos, the culture minister, who was in charge of the 2004 effort. "A minister cannot hold a public dispute with the government, and cannot use reprehensible language against his colleagues" Costas Simitis, the Prime Minister, said in a statement.

That was a reference to frequent outbursts by Mr Pangalos that have embarrassed the government. Most recently, he



said that Greeks ought to improve their manners before the Olympics. "Our streets are full of frowning people. We don't say 'good morning', 'good evening', 'thank you', 'please'. Foreigners are surprised at this phenomenon," he told the newspaper, *Ethnos*.

Dora Bakoyanni, an opposition MP and former culture minister, said there would be many more sackings. "I think many people will be sacrificed because of the lack of prepa-

ration for the Olympics," she said. "Greece is not properly prepared and there are problems ... but this action will not change that."

Outside the main Olympic stadium, workers have put up a large billboard and a clock counting down the days until the opening ceremony.

The latest senior IOC official to warn that Greece is not ready was Dick Pound, a member from Canada. "It's 8 to 9 on the scale of 10," he said, speaking about the problems with the Athens effort. "They have a lot of things to build, a lot of things to plan. It's now more than three years since they got the Games, and they are way behind a proper schedule."

Gianna Angelopoulos, the president of the Athens organising committee, wrote to Mr Samaranch to protest about these remarks - and the implication that Greece might lose the Games. She has been trying to counter fresh speculation that Los Angeles and Seoul are still being considered as alternative venues for 2004.