

The Olympic flame is lit in Sydney in September. Delays in Greece are fuelling controversy over the next games

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Greeks in race to keep Olympics date

p. 3

The International Olympic Committee must be persuaded that the country can stage a successful games. **Kerin Hope** reports

Within minutes of being sworn in as Greece's culture minister and political boss of the next Olympics, Evangelos Venizelos was whisked off to lunch with Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, president of Athoc 2004, the organising body for the games.

The pair must keep up a convincing display of unity in the next three days to persuade the International Olympic Committee that Greece can stage a successful games.

Jacques Rogge, head of an IOC committee assessing progress with preparations for the 2004 games, and a team of experts are to start a make-or-break visit to Athens today. In spite of delays, he says the Greeks "have all the potential to have an excellent games".

Political infighting, as much as delays in building sports facilities and arranging sponsorship, has put the Athens games at risk.

The latest casualty was Theodoros Pangalos, culture minister, who was sacked at the weekend for criticising cabinet colleagues in a newspaper interview.

Last month, Costas Liaskos, Athoc's executive director for infrastructure, was sacked after a clash with Costas Laliotis, public works minister. He has threatened to sue Athoc for spending too much to promote Greece at the Sydney Olympics.

Athoc officials say the threat of losing the games to

Seoul or Barcelona, mentioned in private by some IOC members, has receded after a recent burst of activity by Mrs Daskalaki's team.

The broadcasting contract for the games was signed earlier this month, only a few days behind schedule. Last week OTE, the state-controlled telecoms operator, said it would back an Olympic sponsorship deal worth Dr20bn (\$50m).

In spite of the Greek counter-attack, Mr Rogge's team will still be concerned about the slow pace of decision making. Construction of sports facilities and other infrastructure projects is far behind schedule.

Mr Laliotis will face pressure to complete five facilities, including an indoor sports hall, an artificial lake for rowing and an equestrian centre by January 2004, five months earlier than planned.

Tenders have still to be launched for all the projects. More delays loom because of objections raised by environ-

down some of the city's last surviving olive groves and disputes over land values delayed the expropriation of sites for an electricity substation and a shopping mall for the village.

Furthermore, the World-wide Fund for Nature is leading a campaign against plans to transform marsh-

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mental groups and local authorities. Several court cases have still to be heard.

The Olympic village, intended to house 16,000 athletes, coaches and support staff, is still at the planning stage. Local residents complained over plans to chop

lands at Shinias, north of Athens, into a rowing venue. It has protested to the European Commission on grounds that the project would drive away rare birds and waste the capital's dwindling water resources.

Athoc's initial budget for

the games was set at \$1.7bn, but hopes of making a modest profit have been abandoned. The Greek government is to provide \$1.6bn to cover construction costs for the Olympic village and the sports facilities.

But this figure is likely to rise sharply if, as expected, there is a last-minute rush to complete the facilities.

When Athens won the chance to host the Games in 1997, concerns over inadequate infrastructure, poor accommodation and high atmospheric pollution were outweighed by its historic claim as the birthplace of the modern Olympics.

Thanks to grants from EU structural funds, the city has built two new metro lines which will help reduce pollution levels. A new international airport is due to open

next year and by 2004 will be linked to the city centre by a fast road. A 20-year ban on building new hotels in Athens is about to be lifted.

But the overwhelming success of the Sydney Olympics has placed a huge strain on the Greek organisers.

To defuse expectations, Athoc is already preparing to scale back some sports facilities and promote the Athens games as a modest, family-oriented event suited to a small country with limited resources.

"There will have to be some imaginative solutions," says an Athoc official.

"For example, you may find badminton players competing in a converted aircraft hangar, and the archers shooting in the marble stadium built for the first modern Olympics."

1