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# Greek culture minister in charge of Olympics fired

p. 6.

**Michael Howard** in Athens

Preparations in Athens for the 2004 Olympics ran into more problems yesterday after the prime minister, Costas Simitis, fired his outspoken culture minister, Theodoros Pangalos, who was in charge of overseeing the games.

The sacking, for characteristically blunt remarks made in a newspaper interview in which he criticised government labour reforms and cabinet colleagues, comes just three days ahead of a crucial visit to the Greek capital by a delegation from the International Olympic Committee headed by Jacques Rogge, the IOC vice-president.

Mr Rogge will be looking for assurances that Athens is back on track after a catalogue of delays and personnel changes that have put the city's ability to stage the games into serious doubt.

In April, the IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch, said that Greece was so far behind in its preparations that it was heading towards the "danger zone", where the Olympics could be given to another city.

Mr Simitis then appointed himself head of a new government co-ordinating committee and brought in the flamboyant Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, who had fronted Greece's winning bid in 1997, to head the organising committee.

IOC leaders meeting in Warsaw last week acknowledged the progress made since then and said Athens could hold "excellent games".

But the bickering among Greece's ministers — many of whom were suspicious, even jealous, of Angelopoulos's role — did not stop, prompting the IOC to call for a truce.

With the IOC team about to arrive in Athens, an increasingly exasperated Mr Simitis was determined to show that his government was unified, sources said last night.

"A minister cannot hold a public dispute with the government, and cannot use reprehensible language against his colleagues," Mr Simitis said.

In an interview with the Sunday paper *Ethnos*, Mr Pangalos had questioned the socialist government's proposed labour reforms — which have

sparked a wave of strikes across the country — and charged the foreign minister, George Papandreou, with naivety for his dealings with Turkey.

It is the second time that Mr Simitis has sacked Mr Pangalos. In 1999, the veteran politician was removed from his post as foreign minister for his part in a bungled attempt to offer sanctuary to the fugitive Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan.

The burly 62-year-old has an impressive record of gaffes and his appointment as culture minister following national elections in April raised more than a few eyebrows.

Despite his capriciousness, Mr Pangalos, a popular figure in Greece, was known for possessing a keen mind and for being a competent minister. "His loss will be felt," one cabinet colleague, who asked not to be named, said last night. "He must take some of the credit for upping the rate of progress for the Olympics."

The minister also raised questions about Mr Pangalos's successor, Evangelos Venizelos, and the sort of signal his appointment would give to the IOC.