

International news

Infighting puts Athens Olympics at risk

Michael Howard in Athens

A meeting that could seal the fate of the Athens Olympics takes place today between the woman in charge of the project, Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, and the prime minister, Costas Simitis.

It follows a week of feverish speculation in the Greek capital that Ms Angelopoulos — who led Greece's winning bid to host the 2004 Olympics, and then had to be brought back in six months ago to rescue the preparations after withering criticism from the head of the international Olympic committee (IOC) — is about to resign because of disputes with government ministers.

Ms Angelopoulos wants the back-stabbing to stop and the red tape untied.

There is already some sense of panic about whether the

city will be ready, and should Ms Angelopoulos quit, plans for 2004 will be in worse turmoil; some even say the games could go with her.

"If Gianna goes, then the red phase will have been reached," an IOC official, who asked not to be named, said this week. He was referring to an extraordinary public warning in April from the IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch. He told the Greeks that there were three categories of organisation of the Olympics: green, where everything is proceeding smoothly; yellow, where there are "many problems"; and red, where the "games are in danger".

Greece, he said, was "at the end of the yellow phase".

Many of the promises made when Athens won the games in 1997 have not been kept, and the local organisers have



Angelopoulos demands backing from ministers

become mired in Greece's notorious bureaucracy.

"The games are coming home," Ms Angelopoulos, 45, had said in Sydney. But to what?

Greek government officials

insist that everything is on schedule; with a new underground expected to ease traffic, and a new airport scheduled to open in March 2001, the capital is being transformed, they say.

But there are many worrying gaps. The sites for the athletes' and media villages have still not been chosen. The new airport built by a German company is ready, but there are no road or rail connections.

When Greece won the bid, it said that 70% of the sports venues were in place, but three years later that figure remains unchanged. The IOC wants the sites ready by November 2003 so they can be properly tested; the Greeks say they will not be ready until May 2004.

After Mr Samaranch's broadcast, Mr Simitis, who had initially snubbed Ms Angelopoulos — the rumour was that she

wanted too much power — asked her to mend the damage, despite misgivings from some in his ruling Socialist party.

Ms Angelopoulos, who is married to a shipping tycoon, Theodore Angelopoulos, is a former conservative MP who the Socialists suspect of having political ambitions still.

One minister said last week: "This [the Olympics] is the biggest thing to happen to Greece this decade. Do you think we're going to let her take the credit?"

Since taking on the role as president of the Athens 2004 organising committee (Athoc) six months ago, Ms Angelopoulos is generally credited with injecting a sense of urgency into preparations for the games, and with improving relations with a jittery IOC.

But in Greece's febrile politics, she has also had to brave a

lot of criticism from politicians and the media; this, she says, has undermined the project. "I don't think that we will fail," Ms Angelopoulos said, "but they must leave us alone to do our work. When you are trying to cover your back, you can't devote yourself to your task."

The knives were out for her even before the Olympic flag had arrived in Greece from the Sydney games on October 3.

She came under fire from politicians and the media for "excessive" spending on hospitality in Sydney. There was wrangling about her officials' salaries as well as her demands that she be given more authority to cut through the bureaucratic delays that have cast doubt on Athens's ability to stage the games.

She was also criticised for not returning from Sydney on the same plane as Greece's ath-

letes and officials — she flew in her private jet.

Speculation about her future increased after a "clear-the-air" meeting with Mr Simitis on October 5, after which she announced she was taking a week off "for personal reasons", and reports of a split in the five-member Athoc executive committee.

"What's up with Gianna?" asked one newspaper headline, while another bayed "2004 pieces!" The bickering reached such a pitch last week that Jacques Rogge, the IOC executive monitoring the project, stepped in to call for a ceasefire.

Mr Rogge will head an IOC delegation to Greece in November to assess progress.

At today's meeting Ms Angelopoulos wants an assurance from the prime minister that she retains his support. She also wants a commitment

that he will act to control his ministers.

Staff at the Athens 2004 office were playing down the significance of their boss's "break" last night, saying she was in London visiting her children. Even if she did quit, they added, the games would not be doomed. "Look how many times they changed the management in Sydney," said one. "And they didn't take the games from them."

Given the potential for new embarrassment to the country, however, some Greeks are thinking the unthinkable — that it might be better if the games went elsewhere. As an MP from the Coalition of the Left said: "If Greece loses the games, we will hate the rest of the world. If Greece keeps the games, and then screws it up, the rest of the world will hate us. I know which I'd prefer."