

The Guardian 2.10.2000 p. 3.

Now the race begins to get Athens ready for 2004

Duncan Mackay in Sydney

As fireworks exploded all around her and the most successful games ever came to a close, the woman charged with staging the next one was still doing her best to reassure us that Athens could match Australia.

"We invited the Olympics to come back home," said Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, the head of the Athens organising committee.

"We promised to provide the best environment for the games. We will keep our word."

But after three years of delays, Athens has fallen so far behind in Olympic preparations that serious questions are being raised within the International Olympic Committee about whether the 2004 games should be moved.

The biggest concern has been over construction. Athens claims 70% of the

sports venues are in place – but they claimed that three years ago.

Completing the other 30%, including the Olympic village, remains a problem.

In Sydney, there has already been talk behind the scenes of who might stage the games should Athens not be able to.

"There is no plan B," said Francois Carrard, the director general of the IOC. "The IOC is absolutely committed to seeing an

excellent games in Athens."

Last March, the IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch, described Athens as facing the worst crisis in his 20-year term. He said Athens was stuck on the "amber light" and slipping toward the "red light" danger zone.

All sides agree that significant progress has been made since the appointment of Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, a 45-year-old former MP and wife of the

wealthy shipping magnate Theodore Angelopoulos.

She has brought in her own team and begun cutting through the bureaucratic tangle, while premier Costas Simitis has assumed governmental responsibility for the games.

The Athens organising committee has a budget of \$1.7bn, while the government has committed a total of \$3.2bn to games-related projects.