

Greece could suffer humiliation of losing Olympic Games



Juan Antonio Samaranch: 'Final exam' for Athens

SENIOR OLYMPICS officials hold talks in Athens this week to decide if Greece will pass the "final exam" to stage the 2004 Games - or suffer the humiliation of having the event wrested away at the last moment.

A 100-day deadline set by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in April for Athens to put its house in order falls tomorrow. A stinging IOC report identified serious problems in accommodation, traffic, security, communications, construction, venues and infrastructure.

The IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch, said the

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in Athens

Athens organisers had made progress although Greece still had to pass the "final exam." But Olympic insiders say Mr Samaranch has been forcing the Games in the direction of Athens, because, after the multiple disasters and over-commercialisation of Atlanta, he badly needed the imagery of the Games returning home to the place that spawned the original Olympic ideal.

Greece lost the centenary games in 1996 because the IOC

was appalled at the lack of public transport and hotel space, the chaotic traffic, and the overall shambolic organisation of the Athens effort.

After the Salt Lake City Games bribery scandal there have been inevitable rumours in the Greek press that certain members of the IOC have been bribed to overcome their misgivings.

Andrew Jennings, a British journalist who covered the Salt Lake City Games, says in his latest book on the Olympics that the wives of IOC members got gold necklaces from Athens.

paid for by a prominent Greek family. And there are still serious problems. A new airport to deal with the thousands of extra visitors is unfinished, an extra 25,000 hotel rooms will have to be built by 2004, and the International Olympic village is still a barren tract of scrubland grazed by a goats.

The confusion is exemplified by the debacle over a headquarters for the national organising committee. An expensive new building was acquired in a fashionable quarter of Athens then abandoned after complaints that the supermar-

ket in the basement would undermine the high ideals of the Olympic movement. Last month, the Prime Minister, Costas Simitis, said preparations for the 2004 Olympics were in a "state of emergency". His comments reflect a national panic at the thought that Greece might lose the Games.

"A slap in the face for Greece," was the headline in the leading Greek newspaper *Eleftherotipia*, about the damning IOC report, its main editorial saying "internationally, we are a laughing stock". The most important international

concern is security, heightened following the murder last month of Britain's military attaché, Brigadier Stephen Saunders, by the far-left November 17 group.

The London-based Control Risks Group says, in a confidential briefing for corporate clients: "Ultra-leftists may stage attacks to mark their opposition to the 2004 Olympic Games. Such groups oppose the Games, [saying] they will divert money from public welfare spending. Opposition to the Games will include demonstrations and, possibly, sporadic attacks."