

Greece asks for US aid to fight terror

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GREECE has appealed to the White House for help in fighting terrorism as Scotland Yard detectives investigating the assassination of Brigadier Stephen Saunders, the British military attaché, shift their attention to the north of the country in the hunt for clues.

A senior White House official said last week that Michalis Chrysoschooidis, Greece's public order minister, had asked for assistance in training police in counter-terrorism techniques and America was willing to step in. "We are looking at ways to do it," said the official.

The request was made in talks with visiting American officials who were assured that Greece would bring in a witness protection programme and other measures to promote the prosecution of terrorists. The measures are to include trial by a single judge instead of a jury, a system used effectively by Italy to combat mafia influence.

This was heralded as a breakthrough in Washington, where officials had expressed frustration at Greece's apparent unwillingness to crack down on the November 17 (N17) terrorist group that murdered Saunders in Athens on June 8 and has carried out a string of other killings of Greeks and Americans over the past 25 years.

British police are hoping to



Fatal errors: Greece has shown itself unable to solve the suspected terrorist murders of foreigners such as Saunders, whose coffin was given a military escort to Britain after he was shot in his car in Athens

find evidence linking these killings that could lead them to the assassins of Saunders. A Scotland Yard team is expanding inquiries to the northern city of Thessaloniki, where the military attaché attended a Nato military exercise as an official observer in May.

Thessaloniki was a centre of opposition to the Nato deployment in Kosovo. The tough Balkan port, with its famous harbour and extensive underworld, has a long history of political

violence and assassination from the gunning down of King George of Greece in the first world war to the murder of George Polk, a CBS journalist, during the Greek civil war of the late 1940s.

The Greek colonels' dictatorship from 1968 to 1974 put Thessaloniki under a rule of iron and many of its inhabitants were imprisoned and tortured. The city's Marxist militants put up a violent resistance against the junta and Greek police

believe that one of these ageing former guerrilla fighters may be the leader of N17. The group is named after the day in 1973 when tanks were sent in to crush student protests at the Athens Polytechnic.

When Saunders, 52, visited Thessaloniki in late May to observe Nato's military manoeuvres, he was accompanied by his American opposite number. Unlike the American military attaché, however, Saunders did not have any bodyguards

with him. When his photograph appeared in the newspapers and on Macedonian television, he would have appeared to be an easy target.

Given the history of anti-Nato and pro-Serbian feeling in the city — which had been exacerbated by the Kosovo war — this would have seemed a particularly provocative visit to members of N17.

Sources close to veterans of the anti-junta resistance in Thessaloniki also believe there

may be a Bulgarian link to the terrorist movement. It is thought that the same weapon, a 45 calibre pistol, has been used in several N17 killings, attracting comparisons with the so-called "sacred weapon" embraced by Bulgarian underground movements.

Recruits in the anti-Ottoman movement in Bulgaria, known as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO), swore oaths over the weapon they used for their kill-

ings. The practice was said to have been copied by anti-junta militants, raising speculation that it may have continued among N17 members.

The tiny cell structure of the Greek group is another clue to possible links with the Bulgarian underground. Terrorism experts agree that VMRO, which was founded in Thessaloniki, invented the three-member cell structure that was later taken up by the French resistance and others with great success in Nazi-occupied Europe.

N17 is believed to have a central cell of three members who use two outside experts to carry out surveillance of victims. Given an abundance of claims about the possible identity of N17's leaders, foreign governments have been baffled by Greece's inability to make arrests. The White House has blamed police incompetence and possible links to former government members.

Another factor complicating investigations, however, may

be the age-old rivalry between Athens and Thessaloniki. A standard complaint among Thessaloniki's business people is that while they work hard and keep Greece moving, the corrupt Europhile bureaucrats in Athens squeeze them for tax revenue which is then spent on boats and mistresses.

At the same time, Thessaloniki's citizens complain that their city is starved of investment while Athens soaks up the lion's share: they point to the Olympic Games, to be held in Athens in 2004, as an example. Such bad feeling complicates efforts by Athens police to make contacts in Thessaloniki's brutal underworld.

The Scotland Yard detectives are turning their attention to the city's dimly lit bars and dance clubs with their huge Bosnian, Serbian and Russian bouncers, but they may find the search for people willing to talk to them just as difficult.

Additional reporting: James Pettifer, Thessaloniki