

Greece condemned for lax response to 25 years of terrorism



The bloodstained car belonging to Brigadier Stephen Saunders, who was shot in rush hour traffic in Athens by a gunman on a motorbike. He died in hospital

Yard to help hunt for envoy's killers

Helena Smith in Athens and **Richard Norton-Taylor**

Scotland Yard anti-terrorist officers were preparing to fly to Athens last night as Greece was roundly condemned for failing to act against a small terrorist group suspected of killing a senior British diplomat in a ride-by shooting.

Brigadier Stephen Saunders was shot four times in the head, chest and hands by two helmeted assailants on a motorbike who then disappeared among heavy traffic in central Athens. He died about three hours later in hospital.

Bullet cartridges found at the scene showed that it was the work of November 17, an urban guerrilla group that has acted with impunity since 1975.



Brig Saunders: shot four times by terrorists

It emerged last night that the Foreign Office had conducted a security review of British embassy staff in Athens in March.

Brig Saunderson's car had normal Greek licence plates and no diplomatic insignia — a safety precaution taken by most Western embassies in Athens, police said.

Greece's Nato allies are fast losing patience with its failure to arrest members of November 17.

Athens police yesterday launched a manhunt, setting up roadblocks all over the capital and sending out scores of plainclothes officers to search for the attackers. But its response failed to quell criticism of the authorities' sluggish approach to November 17, none of whose members has been apprehended.

"The Greeks have got to get their act together," a Foreign Office source said last night,

adding that four officers from the anti-terrorist branch would work with the Greek police.

"This highlights again that Greece needs to take a tougher stance against terrorism," said

US Defence Department spokesman Ken Bacon.

A contrite Greek ▶ **Page 2**

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News

Death in the rush hour – the calling card of November 17

Briton is 23rd victim of elusive terror group defined by what it hates, rather than what it believes in

Helena Smith in Athens
and Martin Kettle in Washington

There was no warning, no danger signal as Brigadier Stephen Saunders drove through the heat of the Athens rush hour. The British diplomat, in sunglasses and suit, had stopped at a set of traffic lights on a busy road three miles from the embassy when his assailants, on a motorbike, rode past on the driver's side of his white Rover. It was 7:50am.

Seconds later, Brig Saunders was lying in a pool of blood – his hands, head and chest hit by the gunmen who had fired four shots, then sped away. He had become the 23rd victim of November 17.

Even before Brig Saunders had died in hospital, Greek officials were publicly announcing that he had been targeted by the notorious Marxist-Leninist group.

After one of its longest lulls in violence, the gang had emerged again, using its signature .45 calibre pistol. The other hallmark was the brazen nature of the assassination. The attack was carried out in broad daylight by gunmen acting in an almost nonchalant manner.

November 17, which is thought to operate as a series of independent cells, first appeared in 1973 upon the collapse of eight years of hated military rule in Greece. In the ensuing 25 years, and despite intense attempts to unravel its secrets, little is known about the organisation. No one knows who they are or how many they are, though the group is thought to be small. In 25 years, none of its members has been arrested.

What is known is that November 17 is named after the date in 1973 when the Greek military junta crushed a student uprising at the Athens polytechnic university. It is a group defined by what it is

against, rather than by what it believes in. It is anti the Greek establishment, anti-Turkey, anti-Nato, anti-American and, by extension of that last category, anti-British. It is ultra nationalist: it wants US bases out of Greece, Greece out of Nato, and Turkey out of Cyprus.

The list of the group's victims is, in terrorist terms, impressive: a CIA station chief, Richard Welch, in 1975, a US navy captain and air force sergeant; two Turkish diplomats, two junta torturers and more than a dozen prominent Greeks including rich industrialists.

The site and method of yesterday's attack was almost identical to that of other November 17 killings, including a 1983 ambush that killed the US navy captain George Tsantes and his driver and the 1988 murder of the Greek publisher Alexandros Athanassiadis.

In 1998, November 17 took credit for a series of rocket attacks at foreign targets in the Athens area, including a branch of the US-based Citibank.

Although it never claimed responsibility for them, November 17 is suspected by Washington of conducting rocket attacks against US, Greek and other third-country interests during the Nato bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999.

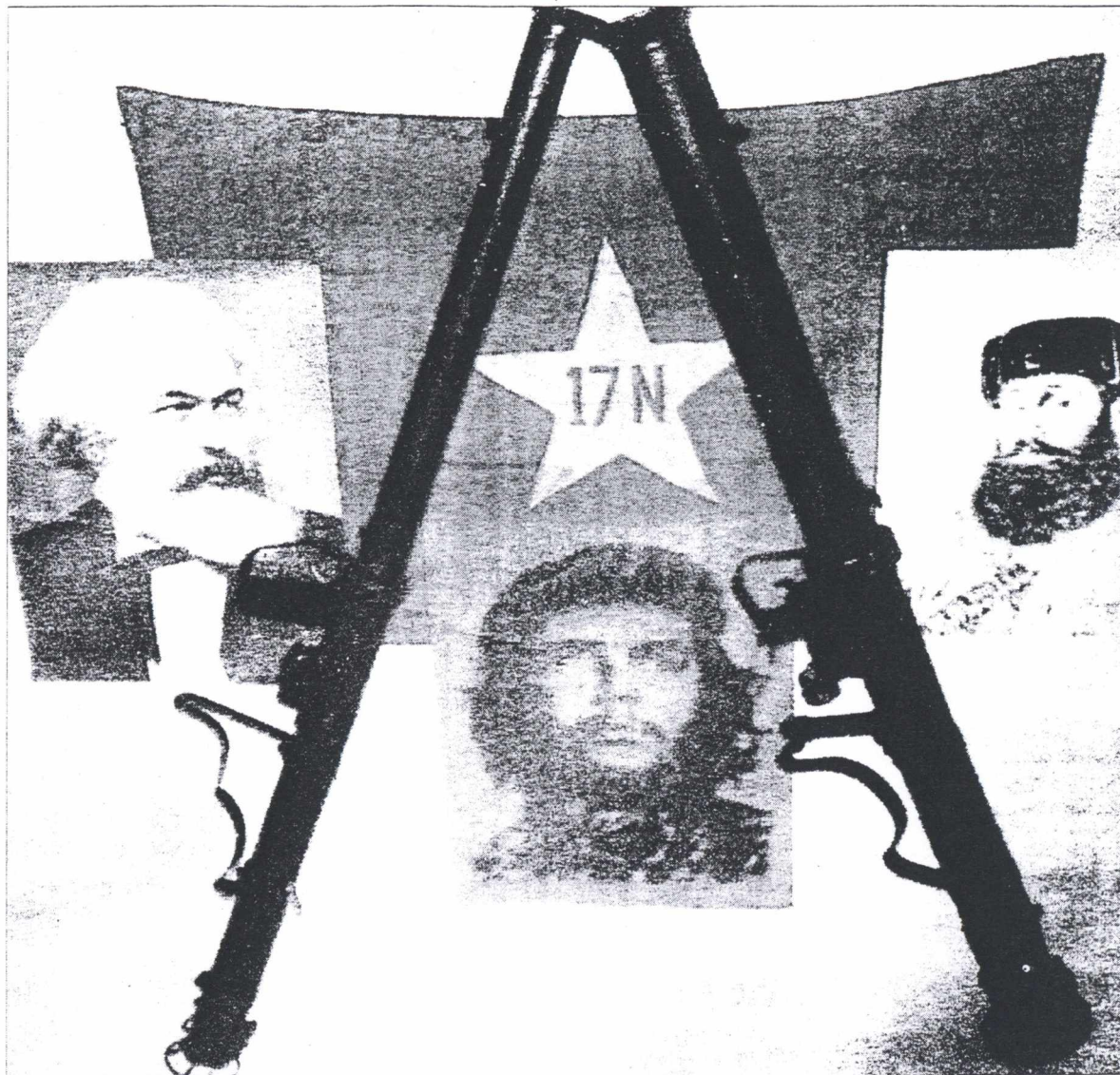
No arrests

The targets included two offices of Pasok, the ruling Greek party, American, French and British-owned banks, and the Dutch embassy. A rocket attack on the German ambassador's home left extensive forensic evidence but no arrests were made.

Brig Saunders is the first Briton to be killed by November 17 but why was he targeted? Several theories circulated yesterday, many speculating that the "special relationship" between Britain and the US may have inspired the group's attentions.

Over the past year Britain has joined the US in providing Greece with counter-terrorism equipment and expertise, not least with the training members of its 300-strong anti-terrorism squad. This weekend is also the first anniversary of the end of the Nato bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, in which Britain played a central role. The government's support for sanctions against Serbia – November 17 has championed Belgrade's cause – were raised as a further possible motive.

Athens is widely seen as the most dangerous post in Europe for British diplomats, and staff at the Athens embassy are given security training before arriving. They are told to change their driving routes regularly and maintain vigilance.



The November 17 logo (above) on a red flag (flanked by Karl Marx, Che Guevara and the Greek leftist leader Aris Velouchiotis). The group used a rocket launcher to attack the Greek finance minister Yiannis Paleokrassas in his car in 1992



Like the US embassy – which spends more on security in Athens than any other city – the British embassy is thought to invest highly in protecting its staff.

While admitting they have a "terrorist problem", Greek officials say they have an even bigger problem in countering it. In an interview with The Guardian, Michalis Chrysohoidis, the public order minister recently blamed widespread police ineptitude for the failure to root out terrorists. "Until the collapse of the junta, being a policeman meant being an informant and as a result standards became very lax. Greece is very behind in counter-terrorism and what we are desperately trying to

do is reorganise the police force in terms of its philosophy, culture and mentality."

All too often, international counter-terrorism officials say, Greek authorities are overly defensive about the issue, viewing outside help and criticism as an encroachment on the country's affairs. The resulting international wrangling has allowed November 17 to slip through the net. Last year the group taunted the authorities by inviting them to "come and get us". They did not, and Brig Saunders paid the price.

Audio report from Helena Smith in Athens at www.guardianunlimited.co.uk

Links

www.fco.gov.uk/ Foreign Office
www.british-embassy.gr/ British embassy in Athens
www.ict.org.il/ Institute for Counter-Terrorism

The Guardian

Assassination in Athens

Greece has failed to be tough on terrorism

The pitiless, execution-style murder of Stephen Saunders, the British defence attaché based in Athens, raises broad questions about the safety of British diplomats posted overseas, the difficulty of rooting out small, ideologically driven groups which use violence to achieve their ends, and the commitment of successive Greek governments to combating terrorism at home and abroad. But first and foremost, this is an awful human tragedy. Brigadier Saunders was a career diplomat and family man who had by all accounts served his country well. The widespread revulsion expressed yesterday, by the Greek prime minister Costas Simitis, by Tony Blair and by the Nato chief, George Robertson, among many others, will be of little consolation to his widow, Heather and to his teenage daughters, Nicola and Catherine. They will wonder, along with the rest of us, why their man had to die.

Was Brig Saunders an easy target, when compared for example with heavily guarded American diplomats? His white Rover car, although unmarked, would have been readily identifiable by the two men on a motorcycle who rode up alongside him on Kifissias Avenue and fired several times through the front passenger window. British diplomats, businessmen and even a Royal Navy warship have been targeted in previous attacks by November 17, the group held responsible for yesterday's atrocity. So why, on this occasion, was Brig Saunders so lethally vulnerable?

November 17, which became active in 1975 when it killed the CIA station chief in Athens and has since murdered 22 other people, is a known, well-established threat. Its crude anti-capitalist, anti-American jingoism is a twisted legacy of Greece's 1970s struggle against militarism and fascism. This alone could

have led its equally warped members, thought to number a mere half dozen or so, to pick on Brig Saunders as a symbol of "foreign oppression". Perhaps the murder was timed to coincide with the climactic anniversary of Nato's Kosovo campaign (deeply unpopular in Greece); was in protest at Greece's growing EU integration (against which November 17 has issued regular polemics) or at the continued US and Nato military presence in Greece; or even was prompted by Britain's refusal, repeated this week, to return the Elgin Marbles, supposedly a great emblem of Greek nationhood.

But in truth, attempts at rational explanation are probably pointless. Sick killers such as these, steeped in their many, odious crimes, abandoned reason many years ago. This very political dysfunction, reinforced by obsessive secretiveness and clan-like personal ties, is perhaps the main reason why no member of November 17 has ever been caught, let alone convicted. This is not a problem unique to Greece. In any modern, urban society, the difficulties of snaring such fanatics are notorious.

All the same, the Greek record on fighting terrorism, whatever its origin or cause, is outstandingly pathetic. A US report this week accused the country of "not fully cooperating" with international attempts to defeat terrorism. The US state department recently identified Greece as "one of the weakest links in Europe's efforts against terrorism". Yesterday, the US repeated its call for a "tougher stance", while Geoffrey Hoon, the defence secretary, demanded that no effort be spared to find the killers of Brig Saunders. The Greeks say, as always, that they are doing all they can. But nobody believes them. If they really expect to host a safe, successful Olympics, they have a lot of work to do before 2004