

Mystery of motive in envoy's murder

November 17 cites role in Kosovo but MoD says he was in Kuwait

Helena Smith in Athens

November 17, Europe's most elusive and effective terrorist gang, yesterday said that it had murdered Britain's top military diplomat in Athens because of his role in Nato's bombardment of Serbian targets last year.

In a 13-page proclamation, outlining its motives for the killing, the group said Brigadier Stephen Saunders, aged 52, was a "professional murderer" who worked for a government that had committed "Nazi-like crimes".

Brig Saunders, the first Briton to be attacked by the group, was assassinated because he had "participated in the planning of the barbaric air strikes" — an assertion that was immediately denied by the Ministry of Defence.

The MoD said that Brig Saunders had no role in the planning of the campaign and was based in Kuwait as part of the UN observers mission when the 78-day bombing campaign against targets in Kosovo and Serbia began in March last year.

Likening the Nato offensive to the second world war annexation by Hitler of

Czechoslovakia, the shadowy group said the Allies had deliberately killed "thousands of unarmed civilians".

The statement, sent to a leftist Greek newspaper at dawn yesterday, also claimed responsibility for five other attacks, including last year's rocket raid on the German ambassador's residence.

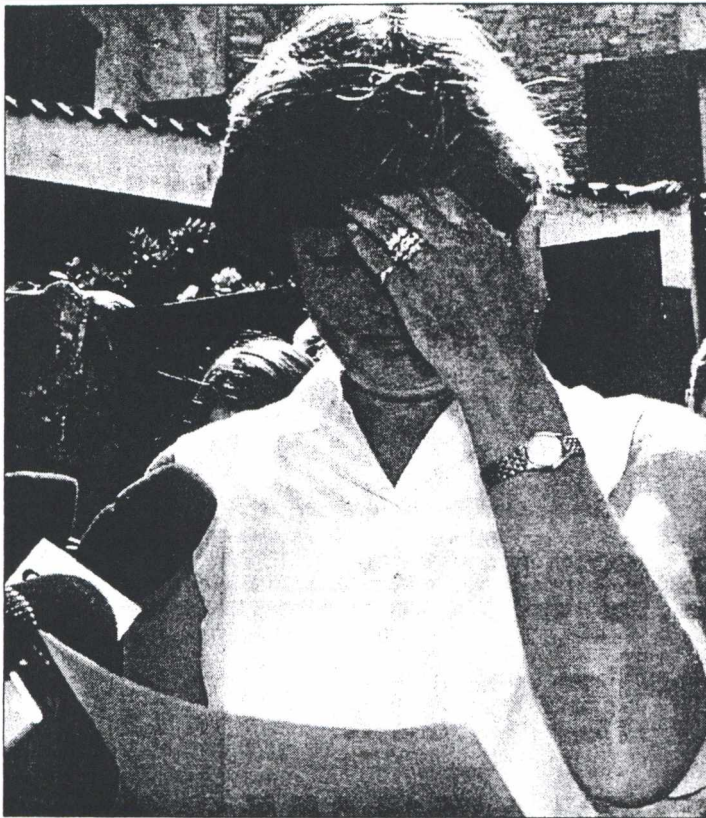
Analysts said the March date on the declaration suggested the murder, executed with extraordinary precision, had been planned several months in advance.

Brigadier Saunders, who had been based in Athens for almost two years, was driving unescorted in an unarmoured car when two gunmen, riding a motorcycle, ambushed him.

He managed to open the door of his white embassy Rover but four bullets lodged in his head, hands and chest were to bring about his death during surgery less than three hours later.

Ballistic tests confirmed that the diplomat was killed by the .45 calibre pistol used in five of the revolutionary organisation's previous attacks.

Brig Saunders was the group's 23rd victim since it emerged with the killing of the CLA's



Heather Saunders addressing the media in Athens yesterday Photograph: Yannis Kolesidis

Athens station chief, Richard Welch, in 1975 shortly after the collapse of seven years of military dictatorship in Greece.

The publication of the proclamation was soon followed by an appeal by the diplomat's widow.

Heather Saunders implored Greeks to help find the "wicked men" who had killed her husband.

Speaking outside the couple's Athenian villa in the presence of her two, distraught

teenage daughters, she said: "For the sake of the future of Greece, these people must be brought to justice."

The Greek government said yesterday that it would step up the restructuring of its police force and make more intense efforts to end terrorist attacks. "We must have results," a spokesman said.

Three Scotland yard detectives arrived in Athens yesterday as security was tightened around British diplomats, not

least Baroness Symons, the deputy defence minister who is in Greece on an official visit.

But sources close to the British-trained Greek counter-terrorism forces last night doubted the gang would ever be unearthed. "CIA agents, who are specialised in the field, have been here for years and they've never got anywhere," said one local analyst.

"I think it's now a matter of luck if November 17 is ever caught."

Caged: 'fans' who brought shame

Vivek Chaudhary in Eindhoven

Belgian police recorded their first arrests of Euro 2000 yesterday — but the three Englishmen detained for possessing offensive weapons were journalists, not hooligans.

As the country prepares for one of the biggest security operations in its history with today's start of Euro 2000, Belgian police officers in Brussels detained two News of the World reporters who were posing for photographs in a Brussels park with hunting knives and a crossbow.

Initially officers thought they had stumbled across a hooligan gang preparing for violence but the reporters and photographer convinced police that it was all in the line of duty. They had bought the weapons as part of a story and the trio were released with a caution after being held for 24 hours.

A News of the World spokeswoman said: "Our journalists were investigating the widespread availability of lethal weapons when they were detained by police. Once the police were satisfied that our team were engaged in a legitimate journalistic exercise, they were set free unconditionally and they have been assured they can remain in Belgium with their official accreditation for Euro 2000."

Brussels police said: "They were seen with knives so our officers acted in accordance with the law."

While the journalists may have been left red-faced by the encounter, police said the arrests underlined claims that they would mount a tight security operation for Euro 2000.