

AX TO GRIND: Anti-U.S. feeling harks back to Washington's support of the military junta

"It's no wonder 17 November has been dubbed one of the world's most elusive terrorist organizations," says a high-ranking former state official, who was afraid to be named. "It's being chased by incompetent, unprofessional police." The source adds, "We are a country of 11 million, no greater than New York. We have a 50,000-strong police force. We know that these suspects circulate within a neighborhood a quarter of the size of Central Park. And we still can't catch them."

The police argue that, in a nation that suffered the junta's wanton use of police brutality, officers are wary of even the lightest use of force. Legal codes also limit the time suspects can be held. Government officials say there are plans to introduce witness protection programs and secret hearings. Prosecutors also need protection: more than a handful of them have been gunned down, and one Supreme Court prosecutor was told his children would be burned alive if he proceeded with a case. Most importantly, however, legal reforms could embolden police action. As one former counterterrorism agent told TIME: "There were many cases in which 17 November assassins were identified on the basis of witness testimony and sketches." But, he concedes, "there were many legal restraints on nabbing them."

Last December, Greek authorities nabbed Avraam Lesperoglou, one of the presumed founders of the Revolutionary People's Struggle—which in turn is believed to be linked to 17 November—as he was entering the country with a false passport. Though sentenced to three-and-a-half years' jail for that, Lesperoglou has yet to be charged in connection with about a dozen terrorist attacks on prosecutors, police and security guards to which he is allegedly linked. U.S. officials insist that now is the time to hunt down 17 November, while Lesperoglou is in custody. But to do so, argues Wayne Merry, the ruling Socialist PASOK Party must face up to some skeletons in its closet. "We know," he says, "that there were people in the government, in the party, who had more than a damn good idea" of the terrorists' identities.

Prime Minister Costas Simitis, the reform-minded successor to the late, anti-American Andreas Papandreou, may have no other choice than to open that Pandora's box. With the Greek capital due to host the Olympic Games in 2004, his government will not want visitors to be wondering if their plane was somehow diverted and landed in Afghanistan instead of Athens. —With reporting by Massimo Calabresi/Washington



LETTERS PIRANKIS-AP

Terrorism Unlimited

Ineptitude and lack of political will leave Greece second only to Colombia in anti-U.S. attacks

By ANTHEE CARASSAVA ATHENS

TWENTY TERRORIST ATTACKS AGAINST American targets in a 12-month period; a combined 40 strikes on U.S., French and British holdings; 52 anti-American protest marches; seven rocket attacks ... the country in question isn't Afghanistan or Iran. It's Greece. The cradle of democracy, and a key NATO ally, is the home of anti-American terrorism. An intelligence report by the U.S. State Department released this month says Greece led Europe in the number of anti-American attacks in 1999, ranking second only to Colombia worldwide.

Much of the anti-U.S. sentiment dates back to Washington's support for the military junta that ruled Greece between 1967 and 1974. Since then, there has been a succession of anti-American waves, the most violent of which came last year, after a botched Greek Foreign Ministry plan to hide Abdullah Ocalan, the Kurdish rebel leader whom Athens sees as a freedom fighter, but whom Ankara and Washington condemn as a terrorist. After Ocalan's capture in Kenya, Athens was riven by riots, with extremists hurling gas-canister bombs at everything representing the West, from European embassy cars to a Ronald McDonald statue. The anti-American feeling only grew as NATO began blasting Greece's best of Balkan friends: the Serbs. Millions of Greeks took to the

streets, and some of the country's 80-plus terrorist groups staged a string of attacks.

What most infuriates the Americans is that the terrorists have almost a free hand. "It's not that Greece has the world's worst terrorist problem," says Wayne Merry, a former U.S. Embassy official now with Washington's Atlantic Council. "It's that Greece has the world's worst counterterrorism problem." The cardinal example is Revolutionary Organization 17 November, a Marxist-Leninist group named for the date the junta ordered tanks to quash a student uprising in 1973. It was responsible for gunning down Richard Welch, the CIA's station chief in Athens, in 1975, and has since killed another 19 people, including three other U.S. Embassy officials.

What are Greek police doing about the violence? "Zilch, zip, zero," huffs one U.S. official. Not one arrest. Exactly a year ago, a 17 November hit man was injured while launching a rocket against the residence of German Ambassador Karl Heinz Kuhna. Blood was spotted near a shrub where the assailant hid to launch the rocket. More was found in the abandoned getaway car, along with strands of the attacker's hair. Then everything went into slow motion. U.S. officials claim it took four months for a Greek police crime lab to type the blood. And when it did, says the State Department report, the authorities "did not follow up aggressively, and made no arrest."