

Greece starts dash for Olympics finish line

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By David Owen and Kerin Hope in Athens

A few kilometres north of Athens a 120-hectare tract of partly cleared scrubland bakes in the afternoon sun. A dog scavenges; a jeep trundles around dirt tracks. At the farthest edge are a couple of men. Otherwise the whole expanse is deserted.

Welcome to the site of the 2004 Olympic village.

Within three years a new city suburb with room to house 17,000 athletes and trainers should have sprung up here. A four-lane, Dr40bn (\$100m, €117m) expressway should link it to the existing Olympic stadium complex 11km away.

The present state of inactivity on the site is not yet a source of deep concern, but it would become so were it to continue much longer.

Although venues for about 70 percent of events are in place in this small country of fewer than 11m people has an immense amount to do to mount a show to compare with Sydney 2000 - by common consent the best summer games ever.

Greece plans to use the games to revolutionise transport in one of Europe's most traffic-clogged conurbations. A new light railway, a 1,700-strong bus fleet and 120km of new roads are all on a menu for which the government has earmarked a budget of Dr1,400bn-Dr1,500bn.

The pressure is on: if Greece is to be seen in the eyes of the world as a modern European state and not a hopelessly recalcitrant Mediterranean backwater, it will have to deliver. The coming week promises to be vital.



Feeling the heat: marathon runners compete at a world championship event in Athens

AP

supervise Olympic projects on a day-to-day basis.

Ioannis Spanudakis, a former senior executive with Dow Chemical who came back to Greece as managing director of Athoc 2001, the organising body for the games, sounds confident Athens can pull it off.

"Greece is becoming more efficient," he says. "Co-ordination of Olympic projects has improved substantially over the past year."

Athoc has no hesitation in tapping expertise acquired at the Sydney games, which marked "the first time a serious attempt was made to ensure a transfer of knowledge systematically". Mr Spanudakis says: "We are using a lot of consultants from Sydney and we'll use more if we need to."

If Greece's team of Olympic organisers persist with their new-found pragmatism, the odds on achieving the bulk of the task will improve by the day.

Whether this will be at the unexpected expense of the Greek taxpayer remains to be seen.

Greece to set the seal on first Marathon run

The Greek government is considering building a permanent running track along the route of the original marathon, write Kerin Hope and David Owen.

George Florides, the Greek sports minister, said that the idea of building such a track was under examination and would "very probably" happen. The project would

form part of a Dr20bn (\$50m) upgrade of the Marathon-to-Athens road planned as part of the preparations for the 2004 Olympics.

The original "marathon run" in 490BC brought news of the Athenians' victory over Persian invaders at the battle of Marathon. Legend has it that the original messenger, Pheidippides, then died of exhaustion.

George Florides, the sports minister, suggests construction proper on the village site could start as soon as next week. Concrete, he says, should also start to pour at three other venues in the next month.

"Actual construction will take 2-4 months less than the time estimated," he says. With the best will in the world, however, Greece is a country where things take time to happen. The site of the impressive new Athens international airport, opened in March, was cleared

almost 20 years before construction started.

But even if bureaucracy and legal hold-ups can be overcome, every shovel of dirt risks turning up archaeological remains. That is exactly what happened at the Olympic village site, where an aqueduct was unearthed that had been built during the rule of Roman Emperor Hadrian and linked Mount Parnis with the Acropolis.

Mr Florides is adamant that this will not lead to delays, but it is inconceiv-

able that more relics will not be uncovered in the run-up to 2004.

In spite of the huge task and political bickering, there is a sense that cabinet ministers and Olympic organisers are trying to bury their differences in an effort to ensure that the city does not bungle its big day. Costas Simitis, the prime minister, has taken responsibility for making the games a success. He has given Mr Florides the job of co-ordinating a task force of officials from more than 20 state agencies who