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Greek bombing raises fears of EU diplomats

Athens accused of dragging its feet on security

Michael Howard in Athens

European Union diplomats in Athens complained yesterday that the Greek authorities are stalling on requests for security changes to protect embassy employees, made in the wake of the murder of Brigadier Stephen Saunders.

The delays are doing little to assuage growing doubts about Greece's ability to crack down on political violence and terrorism ahead of the 2004 Olympic Games in the capital.

Greece has long been regarded as a weak link in the international fight against terrorism. But foreign diplomats in Athens have become increasingly nervous since Sunday night, when a remote-controlled bomb injured Vassilios Michaloliakos, a rightwing member of parliament.

No group or person has claimed responsibility for the

explosion, which left the opposition MP with facial and chest injuries. But police were yesterday investigating the possibility that it was the work of November 17, the elusive terrorist group responsible for the murder of Saunders, the British military attache in Athens, on June 8.

There have been no arrests nor firm leads during a 25-year spell of bombings, rocket attacks and shootings by the November 17 group, which has killed 22 people and injured more than 100.

The murder of Saunders sent a shock-wave through the diplomatic community here, prompting western and European embassies to begin an urgent review of their security measures.

Diplomats in Athens have been a frequent target for the group, which espouses an explosive mix of Marxism and extreme nationalism.

Foreign missions, however, have also borne attacks by other, less lethal, anti-western or anarchist fringe groups.

Diplomatic vehicles and those belonging to western

businesses are regularly the target of firebombs: the Italian embassy has had eight cars set alight in the past two years.

European diplomats cite "bureaucratic foot-dragging" and "a lack of attention" by the Greek authorities in dealing with their safety concerns.

The British embassy, for example, is pressing for the relaxation of rules which limit the number of armour-plated cars permitted for personal protection: the car that Saunders was driving when he was murdered was not reinforced.

The Greek government allows one armoured car for every three diplomatic staff. Britain is thought to have asked for an extra three cars to add to their pool. Foreign embassies in London, by contrast, are allowed one armoured car for each diplomat.

Other embassies, including those of Germany, Belgium and Italy, have been frustrated by the progress of applications for Greek number plates, which would make their vehicles less of a target. They are also perplexed by the lack of clear guidelines on extra police

guards for senior embassy staff.

"It does not give a good message," one EU diplomat said. "Security and safety is supposed to be the government's top priority. We don't doubt the Greek government's political will to fight terrorism, but they don't seem to be able to get their notorious bureaucracy moving. And that could be very dangerous for us."

Another European diplomat complained about Greek double standards. After the arrest of the Kurdish rebel leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in February 1999, Greek embassies in several European capitals were stormed by angry Kurds.

"Following that, we did everything we could to enhance the security around Greek embassies," he said. "But that helpfulness doesn't seem to have been reciprocated."

The Greek government has promised that a new law to fight terrorism will go before parliament next month. But anxious diplomats say that until arrests are made, no amount of legislating will convince them that Athens is winning the fight against terrorists.



Anti-terrorism police comb the site of a bomb blast which injured a rightwing politician in Piraeus, near Athens