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Athens attempts Olympic sport of book-balancing

Greece's government faces a daunting challenge to deliver the facilities on time and up to standard, writes **Kerin Hope**

The half-built amphitheatre in a quarry on the western edge of Athens could be the set for a sword-and-sandals epic. But the House of the Weightlifters – its official name – is designed to help Greece's sporting heroes win more medals at the 2004 Olympics.

Across town, Albanian immigrant workers toil under the hot August sun to complete the foundations of an indoor stadium for wrestling – also a sport at which Balkan athletes excel.

Athens is the first Olympic host city to spend lavishly on permanent venues for weightlifting and wrestling. While these events are considered of marginal interest in some parts of the world, they pull big crowds in Greece. Pyrros Dimas, a weightlifter who won gold medals at the last three Olympics, is the country's most famous athlete.

Officials at Athoc 2004, the organising body for the

games, make clear no expense will be spared. One official said: "It's not just about providing world-class facilities for two sports that have a high profile in Greece. These locations were chosen because the presence of an Olympic complex would upgrade people's surroundings and lifestyles."

But deep cuts are planned at less high-profile venues. Greece is the smallest country to stage a summer Olympics since Finland in 1952 and the Socialist government faces a daunting challenge to deliver all the facilities on time and to the required standards. According to finance ministry estimates, the games budget has soared from €2.5bn to €4.4bn, in spite of cuts in transport projects and road improvements aimed at easing traffic congestion.

Budget concerns are the latest in a series of problems that have plagued the Athens games. After the



Work continues on the amphitheatre in Athens that will stage the Olympic weightlifting event Reuters

Sydney Olympics in 2000, Greece faced threats that the Athens games could be moved to Seoul because of delays in launching construction projects.

Cabinet infighting over games-related projects and the sacking of several senior

managers at Athoc triggered tension with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The cost-cutting plan has already threatened to end in a collision with the IOC. Last month, Denis Oswald, head of the co-ordinating commission for 2004,

complained that the government had announced specific changes without consulting the international sports federations concerned.

Evangelos Venizelos, the culture minister, hastily promised that nothing would be implemented without the

sports officials' approval.

Athoc officials say most cost overruns are the result of construction delays. For example, contractors building the Olympic village, intended to house 16,000 athletes, have managed to make up lost time but only by hiring extra workers and oper-

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ating up to 24 hours a day.

Athens had already built more than 70 per cent of the sports facilities needed for an Olympics when it was awarded the 2004 games. But the main sports complex north of the city centre had been operating for two decades and the government underestimated the refurbishment required to meet the IOC's technical criteria.

Yannis Pyrgiotis, Athoc's

head of construction, says the aim is to trim up to €500m from the budget by eliminating some training facilities, reducing seats and transferring some events to existing sports stadia instead of building new venues.

Mr Pyrgiotis says: "We worked with the government to find imaginative solutions using existing resources."

Boxing contests will be held in an indoor city stadium fitted with extra seats rather than a specially constructed pavilion. Aircraft hangars at the city's former international airport are to be converted for basketball and softball.

Jacques Rogge, president of the IOC and a strong supporter of giving less well-off countries the opportunity to stage a summer Olympics, has backed the government's decision to opt for a less ambitious games.

And Athoc is already promoting a theme of informality, with Athens billed as an Olympics "on a human scale".

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