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Greeks foil attack on British troops

By PAUL ANASTAS
in Athens
and RICHARD ALLEFYN

GREEK authorities have foiled plans by November 17, the terrorist organisation, to attack British troops, it emerged yesterday.

As the police arrested more alleged members, they have found evidence of a planned mortar attack next month against Nato troops carrying supplies to peacekeepers in the former Yugoslavia.

The plan was hatched before the wave of arrests which has badly

damaged the elusive terrorist group in recent weeks.

According to evidence from those arrested, November 17 planned to use mines, bazookas and mortars to attack lorries along the winding roads between the port city of Salonica in northern Greece and Macedonia, in the former Yugoslavia.

The Greek Left has long been angered by the use of their country as a staging post for Nato operations in the Balkans, most of them aimed against Athens's old ally Serbia.

The supply line is used to carry

heavy equipment that cannot be flown. British and other Nato troops travelling with the convoys are armed.

Two more alleged terrorists were arrested yesterday, both of them accused of stealing large quantities of weapons, including mortars, from army supplies.

The total number of suspects detained by the Greek authorities has reached nine, including Alexander Giotopoulos, 58, the alleged leader of the organisation.

All, except Giotopoulos, have admitted membership of the group.

Another five arrests are scheduled over the next few days, including three women and the co-leader of the November 17 organisation.

Greek police also officially named Hercules Kostaris, 37, a married father-of-two, as the second member of the group to face charges for the murder of Brigadier Stephen Saunders, the British defence attache, who was murdered in Athens two years ago.

Lefteris Economou, police spokesman, said Kostaris had refused to confess but that evidence collected since the killing

two years ago plus sworn statements from his fellow-terrorists over the past week, "provide undeniable evidence of his direct involvement".

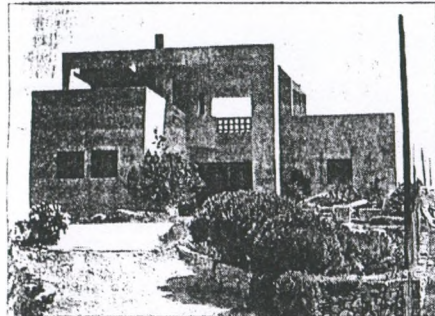
Kostaris is expected to be charged today.

Meanwhile Christos Protopoulos, a government spokesman, confirmed yesterday that special top security cells for the terrorists were being constructed in the courtyard of Korydallos prison on the outskirts of Athens.

Some reports said that 58 cells were being built. The dismantling

of the terrorist group, which since 1975 had claimed responsibility for 23 assassinations, began when Savvas Xyros was captured on June 29 after a bomb accidentally blew up in his hands. He named other members of the group in the hope of receiving a lenient sentence for himself and his brothers also involved in the group.

The anti-capitalist group is named after the day in 1973 when the Greek military rulers sent tanks into the Athens Polytechnic School to crush a student uprising, killing dozens of students.



Giotopoulos's home. He had a legal wrangle over its colour



Giotopoulos: Trotskyist's son



Pictures: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY

Sarah Vavoulos, a British woman who has run a bar with her Greek husband on Lipsi for 12 years, feels 'sorry' for Giotopoulos

Islanders defend their 'innocent professor'

By SANDRA LAVILLE
in Lipsi

ON the small pebbled beach families seek shade from the midday heat. Fishermen mend their nets in the nearby harbour and Yannis Boutafeli sells natural sponges.

After the upheaval of the past five days the tiny island of Lipsi, in the Dodecanese, appears to be huddling itself back into the tranquillity of Greek village life.

The television cameras have left, but the 650 residents are still now emerging from the shock of the arrest and exposure of their fellow islander and friend Michaelis Economou as Alexandros Giotopoulos, leader of the November 17 terrorist group.

Some 150 miles away in Athens, Giotopoulos's recruits, young men he is said to have hired as killers for his Marxist cause against Western and Greek diplomats, are



ideologue - he also took part in attacks. It is only on the island where he lived for 20 years for months at a time, with his French wife Matte Peynaud, that any loyalty remains for "Michaelis".

"I think he is innocent, I really do," said Sarah Vavoulos, a British woman who has run a bar with her Greek husband on Lipsi for 12 years.

"I feel sorry for him. If it turns out next week that all this is true, then maybe I will be angry. But you cannot change your opinion of someone you knew as a friend just like that."

Mrs Vavoulos and her husband socialised regularly with "Michaelis". They were dinner guests at his large pink house, which overlooks the harbour, and took his advice on a legal dispute with the architect who built their bar.

"He was always someone who encouraged you to fight for your rights. He would

always help people to fight. From that perspective I can see that he might have stood up against the junta in the 1970s, but not in any other way."

On the night before Giotopoulos was arrested as he tried to board a hydrofoil from Lipsi to the neighbouring island of Patmos, Mrs Vavoulos spent the evening with him in her bar.

"We chatted all night. He was an intelligent man, really good company. I just feel very shocked and sad..."

"I really liked him. Most people here think he will end up being blamed. The government will try and put all these crimes on one guy. People are really upset."

Her regular visits to his

home revealed no evidence that her friend was in possession of millions, the profits of robberies and raids carried out over 27 years.

"He lived very simply. He went to the beach and came to the bar to drink ouzo with us. He didn't even have a car or a scooter," she said.

Giotopoulos, who changed his identity to Michaelis Economou when he left France, had a high profile on the island from the moment he arrived 20 years ago and erected a tent on the plot of land he had bought to build his architect-designed home.

When he painted it pink, friends supported him in the long legal wrangle with the mayor, who insisted that he

paint it white to match the other houses. "The municipality even crept up to his house one night and painted it white, and Michaelis got up the next day to paint it pink again," said Lefteris Marggos.

While business at Mr Marggos's bar has been booming over the last few days with the arrival of scores of journalists, he is not happy about the reasons for Lipsi gaining worldwide notoriety.

"We don't want our island to be known as the home of terrorism... the home of the leader of November 17. We just want people to come here because it is one of the most beautiful of the Greek islands."

Giotopoulos, the son of a leading figure in the interna-

tional Trotskyist movement, who has hidden his true identity from the closest of his friends, was defiant in front of the prosecutor in Athens.

"How can it be? It is impossible. Where have you got all this from?" he said as he was charged with terrorist offences.

In the last few weeks Giotopoulos, who had registered the house in his wife's name, finally secured the rights to keep it pink, when a court ruled against the municipality after seven years of fighting.

But while his home can retain its distinction, on the highest hill overlooking the harbour, it is unlikely that he will ever return to savour the victory.