

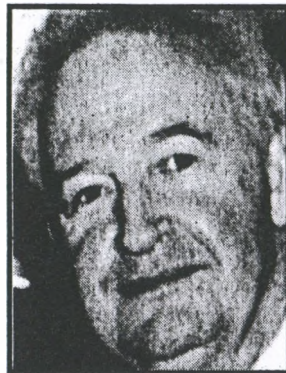
# Greek terror group on verge of collapse after confessions

BY STEVE BOGGAN

FOR ALMOST three decades its members evaded capture, watching as contemporaries such as the Red Brigades and the Baader-Meinhof gang bit the dust.

But last night, the days of Europe's most elusive terror group, 17 November, appeared numbered after Greek police announced the capture of a professor said to be the brains behind the group, and another man confessed to taking part in the murder of Stephen Saunders, the British military attaché. Detectives in Greece said they had rounded up a total of seven suspects, three of whom have confessed to dozens of murders, bombings and bank robberies.

The organisation, which is responsible for 23 political murders since the 1980s, is undergoing an unexpected implosion following a bungled bombing attempt that provided the first clue to the identity of its members.



Alexandros Giotopoulos: Arrested on island of Lipsi

The news will provide welcome relief for Heather Saunders, the wife of the British attaché, who has campaigned for her husband's killers to be brought to justice.

Brigadier Saunders was gunned down by three men as he travelled to work in Athens, in June 2000.

The breakthrough for police came on 29 June when Savas Xiros, a 40-year-old icon painter, was seriously hurt as

a bomb he was trying to plant exploded near the port of Piraeus in Athens. This was the first opportunity the police had ever had to question a 17 November suspect. A revolver found nearby had been taken from a policeman killed during a 1984 robbery blamed on the terrorist grouping.

Within weeks, two hideouts were found stuffed with dozens of anti-tank rockets, assault rifles, documents and disguises. One of the guns found was a .45 calibre pistol that had been used to kill Brigadier Saunders.

Yesterday, Xiros' brother, Vassilis, 30, admitted to the murder of the British diplomat as well as the 1997 killing of the Anglo-Greek businessman Constantinos Peratikos. Police Chief Fotis Nassiakos said that two other men, another brother of Xiros, Christodoulos, 44, an instrument maker, and Dionissis Georgiakis, 26, had also been arrested.

On Wednesday night Greek special forces swooped on the island of Lipsi and arrested 58-



Christodoulos Xiros, right, accompanied by anti-terrorist police in Athens EPA

year-old Paris-born Alexandros Giotopoulos. He was arrested as he tried to board a hydrofoil from the island. Police said that his fingerprints matched those found in one of the 17 November hideouts. Mr Nassiakos said: "From various evidence in the investigation, we began to build a picture of the ideological instructor of the organisation and the writ-

er of its proclamations."

Giotopoulos had been living under the assumed name Michalis Economou. Believed to have been active in the Paris-based student opposition to the military dictatorship which ruled Greece between 1967 and 1974 - after which the group was named - he had been living in France and Greece with a Frenchwoman.

He is the son of Dimitris Giotopoulos, a well-known 1930s Communist theoretician and follower of Leon Trotsky.

Until the death of Brigadier Saunders, not a single member of the group had been arrested during 27 years of activity and 23 murders. Greek politicians admit that the involvement of Scotland Yard proved to be the group's nemesis.