

UK hails 'breakthrough' with Greek terrorist group arrests

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By Jimmy Burns in London

One of Europe's most notorious terrorist groups is being dismantled, British and Greek officials believe, following a breakthrough series of arrests this week.

The Greek group November 17 has been active for 27 years. Its victims include Brigadier Stephen Saunders, the British military attaché in Athens, murdered two years ago.

British antiterrorist agents have been working closely with the Greek authorities since his killing to try to capture the group.

Those arrested include Alexandros Glotopoulos, one of the group's alleged leaders, seized on Wednesday after a swoop on the eastern Aegean island of Lipsi.

Three others captured this week are thought to have been responsible for the assassination of US and UK officials.

In what the British Foreign Office described as an "extremely important breakthrough", Greek police said yesterday that Vassilis Xiros, one of the four, had admitted taking part in the murder of Brigadier Saunders.

His brother Christodoulos had confessed to participating in attacks between 1984 and 1992 that killed nine people, including two US officials. A third man arrested with them had admitted to a bomb attack and a robbery.

The arrests follow a botched bomb attempt last month by Savvas Xeros, the first November 17 operative to be arrested since the organisation first struck with the assassination of Richard Welch, the CIA's Athens chief in 1975. His capture was followed by the discovery of an arms cache that provided vital intelligence about the organisation.

UK police antiterrorist experts, together with the security and

secret intelligence agencies M15 and MI6, used expertise gained in years of tracking the IRA and other terrorist groups to bolster what British officials describe as a chaotic Greek forensic and intelligence situation.

Greece – praised by the UK yesterday for the breakthrough – has been heavily criticised in the past by both Britain and the US for its lack of action against terrorists. In the 1980s and 1990s the country's ruling Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) was suspected of sympathising with the anti-US stance of the November 17 group.

With the Olympic Games due to be held in Athens in 2004 senior Greek ministers are thought to have been concerned at the threat to a successful games that an operational November 17 could pose.

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