

Envoy's widow inspired others to help police

By Daniel McGrory

ONE person above all was singled out for praise by the Greek authorities yesterday as they publicly celebrated the defeat of 17 November after three decades of violence.

Police chiefs, politicians and newspaper editorials agreed that it was the tireless efforts of Heather Saunders to find her husband's killers that inspired the families of Greece's terrorist victims and persuaded others to forget their fears and help in the investigation.

Last month Mrs Saunders was back in Athens, handing out stickers to passing motorists, urging them to help the police, who even three weeks ago were floundering in their hunt for the faceless men who for three decades had maimed and killed.

She was telephoned yesterday at her home in Dorset to be told about the breakthrough before police went on television to announce that they held the man who ambushed and killed the 52-year brigadier.

"I never gave up but there were times I thought God we will never get anywhere," she told *The Times*.

She was embarrassed at yesterday's plaudits. "The families of the other victims did much more. They formed a group and had to live with the threat every day," she said.

She wants to face the men responsible. "I'm not being gory but I want to see it through to the end. I would love to ask them what they think they have gained, what they achieved by killing Stephen."

While many have criticised the Greek investigators, Mrs Saunders never lost faith in them. "They were very genuine men who have been



Heather Saunders wants to face those responsible

proved right. They told me they always believed this group was incredibly small in number, not like other groups. The officers said the group would slip up one day, and when it happened the whole thing would fall apart very quickly.

"I didn't set out on a crusade. I didn't know what else to do after Stephen died except beg people for information."

What motivated her was the thought that another family would suffer as she and her two daughters, Nicola, 17, and Catherine, 15, have done. "I want them to know I'm not going away until all of them have been caught and punished."

A spokeswoman for the British Embassy in Athens said: "What's happened is a major success for the Greek police and the Greek authorities but there is no doubt that Heather Saunders's commitment to the investigation and her determination in finding her husband's killers has had a great impact on the public here. The incident shocked people terribly and Mrs Saunders's name is well known, especially with her moving appearance almost immediately afterwards."

Greek clan confess to killing British envoy

From Daniel McGrory and John Carr in Athens

A MOTORCYCLE mechanic was charged with the murder of Brigadier Stephen Saunders yesterday as Greek police revealed how a family of assassins formed the heart of the 17 November terrorist group.

Vassilis Xiros, 30, confessed to taking part in the ambush of the British defence attaché two years ago as he drove to work and told detectives how he and two of his brothers carried out other killings.

Greek police also said that they had captured the mastermind behind the elusive left-wing group that is blamed for killing 23 people in a 27-year campaign of bombings and assassinations. The alleged leader is a university professor, 58, who was detained by a special forces team as he was about to leave his holiday home on a remote Greek island and flee to Turkey with his French wife.

The Greek chief of police appeared on television yesterday to claim that his men had dismantled the Marxist-inspired organisation that had man-



Yiotopoulos: believed to be the group's leader

aged to evade the authorities for nearly three decades. He praised the Scotland Yard detectives who have worked in Athens for the past two years for their help in apprehending the group.

The Foreign Office said last night: "We welcome these arrests and the other recent breakthroughs in this investigation. We have had very good co-operation with the Greek authorities and these are very positive and significant developments."

Greek politicians did not disguise their jubilation and relief

at finally defeating a ruthless organisation that swore to disrupt the 2004 Athens Olympics. Costas Simitis, the Prime Minister, interrupted a Cabinet meeting to tell his colleagues of yesterday's confessions, and the first charges ever brought against anyone belonging to 17 November.

Three sons of a Greek Orthodox priest lie at the heart of the group's operation. Mr Xiros described in graphic detail how, in June 2000, he was part of the two-man team on a motorbike that ambushed Brigadier Saunders, who was driving to work in peak-hour traffic, and shot him four times.

Showing little emotion, he then went on to confess to killing Costas Peraticos, an Anglo-Greek shipowner, in May 1997.

His elder brother, Christodoulos Xiros, 44, who makes musical instruments, admitted to taking part in nine murders, including that of William Nordeen, the US defence attaché, in 1988. The US had offered a \$2 million reward to anyone who identified the assassins.

Yesterday the two brothers were dressed in white bullet-

proof flak jackets and streets were sealed off so that they could be taken from police headquarters in Athens to the prosecutor's office to be charged.

Alongside them was another of the gang, Dionisis Georgiadis, 26, who is believed to be a close friend of the brothers from the northern Greek town of Florina. Another brother, Savvas Xiros, a 40-year-old painter of religious icons, is still recovering in hospital after he was injured when a bomb he was carrying exploded prematurely.

It is his testimony that led detectives to two safe houses in central Athens where they recovered a weapons cache, including the Colt .45 pistol used in the murder of Brigadier Saunders.

Detectives are puzzled how these three brothers, described last night by neighbours as "models of respectability and family decency" became part of the 17 November group.

Vassilis Xiros was only three years old when 17 November carried out their first assassination in December 1975, which was the murder of Richard



Christodoulos Xiros, left, and brother Vassilis are two of the three suspects detained over a number of terror killings

Welch, the CIA station chief in Athens. Police are certain that this was engineered by Alexander Yiotopoulos, the university professor mastermind of the group. A tall, chubby-faced, white-haired figure who

is code-named Nikita, he was still being questioned last night.

The professor, who was born in France, was on the quayside on the tiny island of Lipsi, 160 miles southeast of

Athens, waiting for a hydrofoil when the police launched their undercover operation on Wednesday night. The special forces team used a red fire brigade helicopter so as not to alert the economics professor, who is also nicknamed the "Tall One".

He was bundled into the helicopter but Marie-Thérèse Peynaud, his French wife, was not with him. Last night police were searching neighbouring islands for her.

Detectives said that the professor was carrying a fake identity card and that his fingerprints had been found on weapons in the Athens safe houses that were used by the group to store its armoury.

While his only brush with authority on the island was when he flouted local by-laws to paint his villa a lurid salmon pink instead of white, anti-terrorist officers revealed that they had had him under surveillance for years. They said that until now they have never had sufficient evidence.

They are understood to have found a battered typewriter in his Athens apartment that they believe he used to write the rambling claims of responsibility that accompanied every atrocity.

Investigators say that the Sorbonne-educated academic is the son of a known left-wing extremist and took part in the 1968 student demonstrations in Paris. They believe that he was schooled in terrorist techniques in Cuba and helped set up the 17 November organisation, which was named after a 1973 student uprising against the military junta.

Fotis Nasiakos, Greece's chief of police, said that the three men charged yesterday had confessed to 42 crimes go-

murder, bombing and robbery. "The accused admitted their acts and described in detail the way these were committed," he said. In their confessions, the men are said to have revealed the second figure who took part in the ambush on Brigadier Saunders.

He is believed to be Dimitris Koufodinas, a 44-year-old beekeeper, who was still on the run last night.

The relief in Greece following the charges was matched by the astonishment at the identity of the motley crew who comprised one of Europe's most deadly and efficient terrorist organisations.

There is little immediate evidence to explain why three sons of a 78-year-old Greek Orthodox priest embraced the Marxist philosophy that was said to motivate the group's campaign against Western diplomats and Greek politicians. The ordinary recruits came from comfortable, middle-class backgrounds, and were involved in obscure professions such as painting icons, building musical organs and beekeeping. They were led by an eccentric academic with a cherubic face.

Greece had been under mounting pressure from its European allies and the US to make arrests amid suspicions the group may have help from some maverick elements among left-wing politicians.

The Prime Minister said: "We are on a good road and we have made progress, but this requires time and thoroughness".

He told his Cabinet: "We must resist pressure that can lead to mistakes. This is not a movie that will end in two hours. We are proceeding with the total breakup of terrorism

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