

Terrorist admits killing brigadier

Greeks seize Marxist leader

By PAUL ANAST
IN ATHENS
AND SEAN O'NEILL

THE 27-year reign of terror of the Greek Marxist group November 17 was close to an end last night as one of its gunmen confessed to the murder of a British military attache and its leader was arrested in a commando raid on a holiday island.

Vassilis Xyros, 30, one of three sons of a retired Orthodox priest in custody accused of November 17 membership, admitted involvement in the drive-by shooting in Athens two years ago of Brig Stephen Saunders.

Police said he had also confessed to participating in the murder in 1997 of the ship owner Constantinos Peratikos, an Anglo-Greek with family and business interests in London. Mr Peratikos was ambushed and shot in the port city of Piraeus.

Vassilis Xyros's brother Christodoulos, 44, has admitted involvement in five other murders and another brother, Savvas, is under police guard in hospital after almost killing himself with a bomb he was planting in Piraeus harbour.

Alexandros Giotopoulos, the group's founder and mastermind, was also in prison after 700 police and military surrounded his holiday home on Lipsi, 160 miles east of Athens.

November 17, named after the day in 1973 when the Greek military junta bloodily suppressed student demonstrations, has been blamed for 23 murders since 1975.

But until Savvas Xyros's "own goal" three weeks ago police had failed to arrest a single suspect connected to the movement.

There were claims that senior Left-wing politicians protected the identities of the group's leaders because they had emerged from the same political struggle against the junta as themselves.

In some sections of the Greek media group members were portrayed as Robin Hood-style defenders of

Greece against American and Western interference.

But the approach of the Olympic Games, to be held in Athens in 2004, placed the Greek government under intense pressure to deal with the domestic terror threat.

Heather Saunders, widow of the murdered British diplomat, said she believed that justice for her late husband was within reach.

"I know there is a long way to go, the police have to collect enough evidence to convict these people," she said. "But this does look like the beginning of the end of this saga."

Speaking at her home in Melbury Osmond, Dorset, Mrs Saunders added: "I would like to thank the police in Athens for the way they have investigated my husband's murder. I will always be grateful for what they have done."

"A lot of the families have waited a long time for these people to be caught and now it looks like it has happened."

"Scotland Yard has always felt this group was catchable but never in my wildest dreams did I think they would be caught two years after Stephen was killed."

The shooting of Brig Saunders, by two men on a motorcycle, was the most recent murder claimed by November 17 since it began its campaign by killing Richard Welch, the CIA station chief in Athens.

The Briton's death led to the involvement of Scotland Yard anti-terrorist officers whose experience in investigating IRA cells was invaluable in tracking November 17.

Prosecutors have charged Christodoulos and Vassilis Xyros and their friend Dionysis Georgiades, 26, with 42 offences since 1984, including first degree murder, attempted murder, bomb attacks, robberies and membership of an outlawed group.

If found guilty they face from 10 years to life in prison. They have three days to prepare their defence before an examining magistrate rules on whether they should face trial. Greece has no death penalty.

Other charges are likely to follow against Savvas Xyros and a number of other men who are also in custody.

Giotopoulos, a veteran of the 1968 student uprising in Paris, is refusing to answer questions but detectives believe he was the author of the group's proclamations and its "ideological instructor".

A government spokesman said that Costas Simitis, the Greek premier, had said "there is evidence of his involvement in the planning of terrorist attacks".

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700 security forces descend on tiny island to end 27 years of killings and crime with the arrest of the founder of November 17

Terror group's house of cards collapses

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THE Greek authorities were leaving nothing to chance as they closed in on the founder of the terrorist group November 17. A force of 700 was deployed to apprehend Alexandros Giotopoulos, 58, at his holiday villa on the Dodecanese island of Lipsi, which has a population of just 600.

Divers were in the waters close to the shore, navy gunboats were further out to sea, army commandos circled overhead in a fire brigade helicopter while the police swarmed ashore.

Giotopoulos - who presented himself to the world as a university professor - and his French wife, Marie-Therese Peynaud, were arrested before they could flee.

Peynaud was said to be packing and Giotopoulos was, reportedly, in possession of a ticket to take him by hydrofoil to Turkey and out of reach of the Greek authorities.

With his arrest the obliteration of Europe's most elusive terror group is virtually completed.

The very size of November 17 - perhaps no more than 25 people including brothers, close friends and lovers - was both its strength and its weakness.

That it was so small made it elusive and almost impossible for law enforcement agencies to penetrate. Yet because its

‘We would never suspect such a gentle and kind man could be a terrorist leader’

members were so few and so tightly-knit, once the structure had been cracked it crumbled with astonishing speed.

The crack came almost three weeks ago when Savvas Xyros, 40, an icon painter and said by friends to be “a truly holy and harmless man”, was injured when a bomb he was planting at Piraeus, near Athens, exploded in his hands.

A bag that Xyros had been carrying contained a gun, an address book and keys that led police to a basement flat in an Athens suburb containing an arsenal of weapons and a wealth of other clues.

Xyros, whose sight was restored by emergency surgery after he was blinded in the blast, identified Giotopoulos as the “godfather” of November 17 and directed police to some of the group's most ruthless assassins - his own brothers.

Fotis Nasiakos, Greece's chief of police, disclosed yesterday that Christodoulos and Vassilis Xyros had confessed to involvement in several murders. Dionysis Georgiades, their close friend, has admitted involvement in bombings and robberies. Those three have been

charged. Further charges will follow against Savvas Xyros and two other men.

During the 27 years in which it has been blamed for 23 murders and many attempted killings and bombings - directed mainly against American and Western European targets - November 17 had been heavily involved in robbery.

The raids netted tens of millions of pounds providing far more than was needed for the limited campaign of murder. The excess was used to purchase country homes and city apartments, some of which were used as operational hideouts.

Giotopoulos's island retreat was a perk for the terrorist mastermind, a role he hid behind the guise of a mild-mannered and sociable academic.

“We would never suspect that such a gentle and kind man could be the leader of such a deadly terrorist organisation,” said a teacher at his sons' former school.

The Greek authorities said Giotopoulos had been born in Paris in 1944, the son of Dimitris Giotopoulos, a former close associate of Leon Trotsky.

Friends of Giotopoulos and his wife in Athens said Alexandros had studied at the Paris University faculty of Law and Social Sciences but suspected that he never obtained a degree. He took part in the 1969 student uprising and was the leader of the Greek Student Union of France and a member of the outlawed Greek Communist Party during the 1967-74 Greek military dictatorship.

He returned to Athens in 1974 when the junta collapsed and became one of the founders of November 17 - named after the date of the bloody suppression of student demonstrations at Athens in 1973.

Giotopoulos was the “Ghost Man”, until he was named by Savvas Xyros, who with his brothers, the sons of an Orthodox priest, were some of the organisation's most deadly recruits.

Christodoulos, 44, a maker of musical instruments, is believed to have been involved in nine murders and five attempted murders during 18 years as a terrorist.

Police said he had been involved in the murder of William Nordeen, an American naval attaché in June 1988 and the March 1991 bombing death of Ronald Stewart, a sergeant in the United States Air Force.

Vassilis Xyros, 30, has admitted taking part in the murder of Brig Stephen Saunders, the British defence attaché on June 8, 2000. Brig Saunders's murder is the last killing known to have been carried out by the group and led to the involvement of Scotland Yard anti-terrorist officers in the hunt for November 17 - a crucial development according to the Greek government.

Vassilis has also confessed to involvement in the 1997 killing of Constantinos Peratikos, a London-based tycoon.

Savvas Xyros also gave police the name of Dimitris Koufodinas, the group's deputy leader, who is still at large.

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