

# Britain helped crack Greek terror hideout

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By PAUL ANAST  
IN ATHENS  
AND DAVID GRAVES

GREECE yesterday trumpeted the biggest breakthrough against the November 17 terrorist group in 27 years and acknowledged the assistance Britain and America had given in the hunt.

After the discovery of the elusive Marxist group's hideout in central Athens following a bungled bombing in Piraeus, the Greek prime minister, Costas Simitis, said the development was "the result of systematic work ... in recent years".

The breakthrough also took on a wider international terror dimension when it was disclosed that an arrested November 17 bomber and his Spanish girlfriend had made frequent trips to Sudan, whose Islamic regime has been closely linked to Osama bin Laden and his al-Qa'eda network.

Despite the haul of weapons and ammunition, Mr Simitis said more work had to be done on "dismantling the network" and arresting more members of the organisation, responsible for 23 murders since 1975.

"We want to strike a crushing blow against terrorism," the prime minister said. Greek police drew up a wanted list

of 10 terrorist suspects. Police at all airports, harbours and land borders were placed on alert in case they tried to flee the country. Some of the names were given to Interpol in case they were already abroad.

The decisive breakthrough came when a bomb blew up as it was being planted by Savvas Xyros, 40, on Saturday. It led anti-terrorist police to November 17's lair on Wednesday evening.

In a basement apartment in central Athens, police found heavy weapons and ammunition, a November 17 red star banner, wigs and posters of Che Guevara and Karl Marx. The apartment had been rented by Xyros under a false name for eight years.

The raid was led by Greece's anti-terrorist squad, which has been closely working with MI6 and Scotland Yard, as well as American security agencies, since the murder of the British defence attache, Brig Stephen Saunders, in Athens two years ago.

Police sources in Athens have confirmed that one of the guns found was the G3 automatic rifle used to murder Brig Saunders, who was shot by a gunman on a motorcycle as he drove from his home to the British Embassy.

Athens had sought help from London and Washington in an attempt to crush

November 17 ahead of the 2004 Olympic Games in the Greek capital and to counter accusations that it was soft on terrorism.

While the close relationship between the security agencies has done much to restore the credibility of Greece's capacity to tackle terrorism, it was ultimately Xyros's bungled bombing that led police to Europe's most elusive terror group.

Greek police sources said that US and British officials were involved in planning the search operation on Wednesday but did not take part in the raid.

Xyros, a church icon painter and son of a retired Greek Orthodox priest, was being held under heavy guard in an Athens hospital last night after losing a hand in the explosion while attempting to blow up the ticketing office of a shipping company. He was heavily sedated and had not spoken to police.

Police said his fingerprints matched those found in a car used by November 17 in the murder of Costis Peratikos, an Anglo-Greek shipowner, in 1997.

A .38 calibre revolver found in a bag close to him was stolen from a police officer murdered by the group in December 1984 and used in six subsequent attacks. Rocket launchers found at the flat had been stolen from a military base in 1988.

## Net closes on Greece's terrorists

By DAVID GRAVES  
AND PAUL ANAST

IT has been described, quite rightly, as the most elusive terrorist organisation in Europe. Now, the end of Greece's November 17 Marxist group may be in sight.

For more than a quarter of a century Greece was unable to hunt down the shadowy organisation. Not one member was arrested. Then, on Saturday, one of the alleged terrorists was left wounded after blowing himself up while attempting another attack in the port of Piraeus.

The Greeks finally had a suspected member of November 17 in custody - an icon painter, Savvas Xyros. They also found a cache of arms linked to assassinations at a flat he had rented in central Athens.

It was a breakthrough that the Greek government, long criticised for being soft on terrorism, was keen to trumpet to the world. Yesterday diplomats in Athens said it was too early to herald the end of November 17 - named after the day in 1973 when the Greek colonels' Right wing junta crushed a student rebellion.

The Greek media yesterday noted that the improvement in Greek counter-terrorism efforts followed the murder two years ago of Brig Stephen Saunders, the British defence attache, the last victim of November 17, and the acceptance of direct participation

by British and American agents on Greek territory. Costas Tsimas, the former Greek intelligence chief whose tenure was bedeviled by foiled attempts to catch members of the group in the 1980s and 1990s, also noted that Brig Saunders's death marked the "beginning of the end" for Europe's longest-lasting terrorist group.

The breakthrough could not have come at a better time for the Greek government of Prime Minister Costas Simitis.

With Athens due to host the Olympic Games in 2004, Mr Simitis, a moderate socialist, had personally shouldered the burden of making them a success. To Washington, London and other Western governments that means getting November 17 under control.

What has long amazed US and British anti-terrorist officers is how little headway their Greek counterparts had made against ultra-Left November 17. Since Dec 23, 1975, when Richard Welch, the CIA's station chief in Athens, was shot dead outside his home, the group has acted with impunity.

Twenty-two other victims were murdered, including American and Turkish diplomats and Greek businessmen.

The Red Brigades in Italy, the Red Army Faction in Germany and Action Directe in France were all hunted down but November 17 remained untouched. In private, West-

ern governments, particularly Washington, accused the Greek police of incompetence, pointed to the nonchalance of politicians and noted widespread anti-Western feelings in Greece.

November 17 was often presented in the centre-left Greek media as an avenging group of Robin Hoods, who satisfied the angriest elements of Greek society - those embittered by the American and Nato stance towards the 1967-1974 military dictatorship, and the 1974 Turkish invasion and continuing occupation of Cyprus.

November 17's declarations also reflected Greek frustration over the country's foreign policy dilemmas, since Athens finds itself as a member of the European Union and of Nato and yet is at odds with mainstream Western policy.

There were suspicions, never confirmed, that the late Andreas Papandreou, Mr Simitis's predecessor, had colluded with November 17 in the 1990s to negotiate a halt to attacks.

James Woolsey, the former CIA director, claimed that several former Greek ministers had known the identities of November 17 members but did nothing.

In response to the criticism from Washington and London, Mr Simitis agreed to improve Greek security, introduce tougher anti-terrorist legislation and to cooperate with Western security

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