

EUROPEAN NEWS

Fingerprints link Greek bomber to British victim

BY DANIEL HOWDEN
in Athens

GREEK POLICE were claiming yesterday that a man in their custody was the first captured killer of the November 17 terrorist group, after fingerprint evidence linked the suspect to the murder in 1997 of Costas Peratikos, a British citizen.

Savvas Xiros, 40, was arrested on Saturday after a bomb he was carrying exploded in Piraeus, the port of Athens. The chief of the Greek police, Fotis Nassiakos, said his fingerprints matched samples taken from the getaway vehicle used in the killing of Mr Peratikos.

Nicholas Peratikos, the brother of the British victim, expressed his joy and surprise at the possible identification of one of the killers. "I am extremely moved that this man is in custody. I never thought we'd know the actual identity of one of the killers, only ever one of the masterminds or the ideological leaders," he told *The Independent*.

Mr Peratikos was the first British victim in the history of the ultra-nationalist urban guerrilla group, which has



Savvas Xiros, left, believed to be a November 17 terrorist; and Costas Peratikos, killed by the group

claimed 23 lives in three decades of killing with virtual impunity. The same group claimed responsibility for the murder of Brigadier Stephen Saunders, a British defence attaché, two years ago.

Mr Peratikos, a ship owner, was shot dead by two disguised men five years ago as he left work at his company offices. His killers and a getaway driver left their vehicle at the scene because they were unable to start it, and commandeered a taxi.

The arrest of Mr Xiros, a religious icon painter, has been hailed as the first big break-

through in relation to November 17 terrorism, which has been responsible for the deaths of foreign diplomats, military personnel and industrialists.

Police have also uncovered what they claim is November 17's main hideout, at a central Athens property they believe to have been rented for the past eight years by Mr Xiros, under a false name.

Police from the anti-terrorist unit raided the city centre address late on Wednesday, uncovering handguns, rockets and bazookas as well as a computer, wigs, disguises and a

November 17 banner. "We have found the den of the terrorist group November 17," Mr Nassiakos said.

Mr Xiros remains in a serious condition in the accident and emergency ward of the Evangelismos hospital in Athens. He is under police guard. On Sunday, he had surgery for his hand, face and chest injuries and doctors have announced that he is breathing without assistance for the first time since the explosion. Police have not been able to take a statement from him.

The Greek Prime Minister, Costas Simitis, paid tribute to the police and the justice ministry. But he added: "There is still work to do penetrate the network, to collect the evidence and to arrest all those who are responsible... Our aim is to uproot terrorism. This is a time for action, not words. We want to strike a crushing blow against terrorism."

Greece, which will host the 2004 Olympics, has been under intense pressure from foreign governments to crack down on November 17. A team of Scotland Yard counter-terrorist experts has been assigned to the Greek police to assist in the



A police officer searches a van used by members of November 17 to kill Costas Peratikos, a ship owner with British nationality, in 1997. The fingerprints of a man arrested on Saturday have been linked to the vehicle *Reuters*

search for the killers of Brigadier Saunders.

Observers have credited Scotland Yard and the FBI for instilling a new professionalism

in their Greek counterparts. Mr Peratikos, the British victim's brother, said: "They [Scotland Yard] have played an important role - training the Greek police

in collecting forensic evidence and following up on leads."

Mr Peratikos called on the Greek authorities to ensure the recent breakthroughs led to

prosecutions and brought an end to the violence of November 17: "If this is handled properly then it can all be finally unravelled," he said.