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Greek terrorists unmasked, after 27 years

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ATHENS: After 27 years of unsuccessful attempts to track down the country's most dangerous terrorist group, the Greek police on Thursday claimed a major breakthrough with the arrest of a member of the Revolutionary Organization 17 November and the discovery of the group's main hideout and weapons cache.

Police Commissioner Fotis Natsiakos said at a news conference in

Athens that police officers had discovered the hideout and weapons in a studio apartment on the ground floor of a residential building in the heart of the Greek capital.

They arrested Savvas Xeros, a 40-year-old painter of Christian icons and son of an Orthodox priest, who was injured in a botched bomb attack last weekend.

Since the terrorist group first burst into the public eye in December 1975 with the killing of Richard Welch, the CIA station chief in Athens, the Greek

authorities have never succeeded in arresting, killing or even publicly identifying any of its members.

Despite the breakthrough, Prime Minister Costas Simitis warned Thursday that the police still have a long way to go before they finally destroy the 17 November organization.

"There is still work to be done to dismantle the network, to gather the evidence, to arrest all those responsible," Simitis said. He added that the police had "made significant steps" and were pressing their investigation "because

we want the blow against terrorism to be crushing."

Since its first attack in 1975, 22 killings have been claimed by the group, which was named after the date of a bloody student uprising in 1973 that led to the demise of a seven-year military dictatorship a year later.

The group's last victim, Britain's military attaché in Athens, Brigadier Stephen Saunders, was gunned down in the city's busiest boulevard while driv-

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ing to work on June 9, 2000.

Police officials said that Xeros, the suspected terrorist, was nearly killed Saturday when one of two bombs that he had carried Piraeus, the country's biggest port, exploded prematurely.

The police said Xeros was in critical condition at the state-run Evangelismos hospital in Athens, where he is undergoing treatment for near-fatal wounds to the groin, chest and face. They said he had yet to be charged.

Xeros remains under protective custody, said Eleftherios Economou, a police spokesman. He said testimony from Xeros would "prove crucial to ongoing attempts to reel in the group's hit-men and masterminds."

At the site of the blast, police officers found a Smith & Wesson revolver in Xeros's tote bag, together with two grenades. They linked the gun to an attack in 1984 by the terrorist group, which has been blamed for several other killings, including the assassination in May 1997 of the shipowner Costis Peraticos.

By midweek, investigations took another dramatic turn: A mystery witness

appeared before the authorities and claimed that Xeros was one of three terrorists involved in the attack against Peraticos.

At a news conference Thursday, Nassiakos said investigators had matched Xeros's fingerprints to those found on a stalled van that the terrorists had used in an attempt to flee the site of Peraticos's assassination.

Reached by telephone, the ship-owners brother, Nicos, said: "These are all very exciting developments. But it rests with the Greek authorities now to exploit all evidence at their disposal to lead to an ultimate conclusion of this cancer plaguing Greece."

Nassiakos said the authorities "were assessing evidence found in the hideout." He added that the terror group's membership was believed to number no more than a dozen.

Weapons found during the raid on Wednesday included anti-tank missiles, grenades and guns.

The group's trademark red-star flag, proclamations and a computer were also located in the dingy apartment rented by Xeros under a fake name for the past eight years.

The most incriminating piece of evi-

dence, however, has yet to be found: the gun used by the organization to kill 22 people in its 27 years of elusive operations.

Police raids were reported to be in progress in a string of regions across the country late Thursday, but the authorities declined to comment on those searches.

The 17 November organization ranks among the U.S. State Department's most-wanted terrorist groups. It reportedly has claimed responsibility for the killing of five Americans stationed in Athens, including the slaying of an American admiral, and has been at the focus of FBI investigations for nearly 30 years.

In its annual report to Congress last month, the State Department called Greece's failure to arrest members of 17 November "troubling." In recent years, officials, including a former U.S. ambassador to Athens, Thomas Niles, have alleged links between Greece's ruling political elite and 17 November.

With Athens gearing to act as host of the 2004 Summer Olympics, international pressure has mounted on the socialist government of Simitis to break up the terrorist group.