

The body of Stephen Saunders returning to Britain

Found: the smoking gun that leads to a 'phantom' terror gang

A GREEK Orthodox icon painter and son of a priest who blew off his hand in a botched bombing last weekend has become the police's first serious lead into the workings of November 17, the world's most elusive terrorist organisation.

Savvas Xiros, 40, is under police guard at an Athens hospital after being detained outside the offices of a ferry operator in Piraeus when a time bomb he was carrying exploded in his hands.

A handgun found near the injured man has provided authorities with crucial evidence connected to 17N, known in Greece as the phantom organisation. "This is the mistake we've all been waiting all these years for," said a senior police official.

The ultra-nationalist, Marxist organisation has claimed 23 victims in three decades of killing with virtual impunity. Greek authorities have never arrested, killed, injured or even publicly identified a single member of the organisation.

"This could signal the end of one of the world's most vicious organisations," said Dr Magnus Ranstorp of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at St Andrews University in Scotland. Dr Ranstorp said that as well as organisation and commitment, authorities needed luck to make a breakthrough in terrorist investigations.

The lucky break was the gun found at the scene of the bombing. It was stolen from a police officer killed during a bank robbery in 1984, which the police believe was the work of November 17.

The gun used to kill the

BY DANIEL HOWDEN
in Athens

officer, Christos Matis, was also used in the killing of the Anglo-Greek shipowner Costas Peratikos in Piraeus in 1997 and of the prosecutor Costas Androulidakis in 1989.

Police have linked the weapon to four other incidents including the knee-capping of the prosecutor Panayiotis Tarasouleas in 1989 and a shooting with police in 1991.

The .38 calibre gun was found in a bag with two hand grenades next to Mr Xiros, who had four hours of surgery on his destroyed hand. Bomb disposal experts defused a second device near the scene.

Doctors at the Evangelismos Hospital intensive care unit, where Mr Xiros was being treated yesterday, said he remained in a critical condition, with serious injuries to his face, chest and hand. Investigators from the anti-terrorist squad have not taken any official statements from him.

Police sources said the bungled bombing was the result of a panicked attempt to dispose of evidence. Mr Xiros and two other men had been under surveillance before the explosion. The bombing, if it was the work of 17N, was a break with the group's traditional tactics which have followed a pattern established almost 27 years ago.

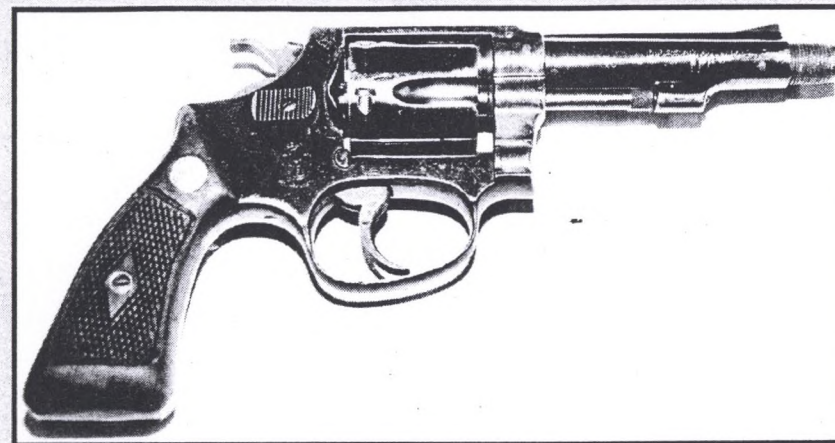
Late in the evening of 23 December 1975, the Athens CIA station chief, Richard Welch, and his wife, Cristina, were driving home from a Christmas party when their path was blocked by a motorcycle. "He [Welch] got out of the car



Savvas Xiros, who was arrested after a time bomb went off prematurely

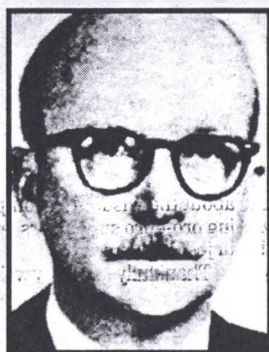


The offices of the Piraeus ferry operator where the bomb exploded



The gun found near Mr Xiros that has provided a breakthrough for police

NOVEMBER 17 THREE OF THE VICTIMS



CIA CHIEF RICHARD WELCH
The terror group announced its arrival by shooting dead the chief of the Athens CIA station in front of his wife and driver after he left a Christmas party in 1975. Four .45 calibre bullets were found. The group blamed "US imperialism" and condemned American links with the Greek colonels' dictatorship.



SHIPPING TYCOON COSTAS PERATIKOS
The controversial Anglo-Greek businessman was shot by three men outside his company's offices in Piraeus in May 1997. He was hit four times in the head, chest and pelvis with a .45 calibre pistol, in front of 20 witnesses. The terror group said he was attacked because his purchase of state shipyards was a "major scandal".



BRITISH ARMY OFFICER BRIGADIER SAUNDERS
The defence attaché Brigadier Stephen Saunders was shot four times with a .45 calibre weapon as he drove to work in Athens in June 2000. The terrorists claimed he had helped to plan the Nato bombing campaign in Kosovo. Britain said he had been serving in Kuwait during the Kosovo campaign.

because he thought it was a friend," Mrs Welch said later. As the CIA man walked towards the bike a hooded figure opened fire with a semi-automatic pistol, killing him instantly.

The simple practice of close-range executions has been repeated 22 times in the ensuing 26 years, with the signature .45 calibre weapon used in more than half of the killings.

The group's latest murder, two years ago, was committed during the day at a busy Athens road junction. On the morning of 8 June 2000, Heather Saunders waved goodbye to her husband, the British defence attaché Brigadier Stephen Saunders, as he headed to work. When Mr Saunders, who

was driving an unmarked car, stopped at a set of traffic lights opposite the Olympic Stadium, two men on a moped pulled alongside the car and one fired four shots through the passenger window. Mr Saunders died on his way to hospital.

November 17 advocates the overthrow of the capitalist state and its replacement by an extreme leftist state. It has attacked American diplomats and military personnel as well as Greek politicians, industrialists and Turkish diplomats, and takes its name from the day in 1973 when the Greek military junta used tanks to crush an uprising by students and workers at the Athens Polytechnic. Initially pursuing a radical

Marxist agenda calling for an armed revolution against US imperialism, 17N's targets were broadly in line with a public that was aggrieved by the alleged links between the colonels' dictatorship and the American administration.

In the first of many communiques, 17N justified the Welch killing by claiming the "CIA was responsible for supporting the military junta". Subsequent tracts have portrayed the organisation as a modern Robin Hood punishing the rich on behalf of the poor. It has increasingly complained about the insidious foreign influence supposedly corrupting Greece.

George Kassimeris, a political analyst who has specialised

in the workings of the group, believes it is unique. "What distinguishes 17N from other terrorist organisations is its durability and astonishing resistance to infiltration," he said.

Mr Saunders' widow has since led an emotional campaign to see her husband's killers brought to justice. Her appeals - unlike those of the relatives of her fellow Briton Mr Peratikos - brought within weeks of the killing the assignment of a team of Scotland Yard experts to Greece's beefed up anti-terrorist squad.

Training and advice from the British authorities have been largely credited with overhauling Greece's discredited police efforts in an investigation

that had already begun to show signs of progress before the weekend breakthrough.

The senior Greek commentator Alexis Papahellas has noted a new approach from the authorities and believes that British police have had a big impact on investigations.

"They have played an important role, they have helped both in terms of professionalism and methodology," he told *The Independent*.

Writing in the left-of-centre daily *To Vima*, Mr Papahellas quoted a senior investigator as saying: "We know the names of the three or four persons who are the founding nucleus of 17N and we are waiting only to collect evidence which will be

acceptable in court. The leader is approximately 65 years old and believed to have taken part in the killing of the Athens director CIA, Richard Welch."

Whether Mr Xiros, an Orthodox icon painter by profession, is part of what the investigating authorities call the "second generation" of November 17 terrorists is not yet clear.

Police have searched a warehouse in the Kolonos district of Athens where he painted his icons and have detained Mr Xiros's Spanish girlfriend, Alicia Romero Cortez, the daughter of a Majorca businessman. They are also investigating a series of recent trips Mr Xiros made to Sudan.