



OLYMPIC Insecurity

The Athens Games will be the biggest—and most expensive—peacetime security operation ever. It's not on schedule.

BY MELINDA LIU AND TOULA VLAHOU

IT'S LESS THAN HALF A YEAR BEFORE the Summer Games—and the security folks are jumpy. Police in a neighboring country just busted a gang of illegal immigrants who had maps and notes suggesting a planned attack on a nuclear reactor just a few miles from the Olympic Stadium. Organizers are even twitchier about the possibility of an attack using chemical or biological agents. Not too long ago members of a doomsday sect hunkered down on a local farm and tested a deadly nerve agent. Authorities have kept their fears under wraps to avoid mass panic. But in the meantime, they've stockpiled pharmaceuticals, trained a biochemical response force and equipped mobile labs at triage centers in hospitals, hotels and the Olympic Park.

The good news is this isn't today in

Athens, but rather April 2000 in Sydney, which went on to host a successful—and safe—Summer Games. The bad news is that Greece is nowhere near as prepared as Australia was six months before its Games. With fears of a terrorist attack on the Olympics higher than at any point since Munich in 1972, Greek officials are frantically seeking help from their friends. Israelis are providing military tips on stopping suicide bombers. Russians are sharing insights from their struggle against Chechen extremists. NATO is on standby to supply AWACS surveillance planes and is discussing contingency planning for the unthinkable: a chemical or biological attack on Olympic spectators. If granted, such assistance would be unprecedented for the military alliance.

In ancient times, Greek warriors lay down

their weapons during the Olympics. But as the Games return to their birthplace, they'll be the mostly heavily armed, surveilled and guarded contest ever. Escorts with firearms will accompany athletes from countries such as the United States and Britain, who are considered to be terrorist targets. Greece will deploy more than 50,000 security personnel around Athens, including 16,000 soldiers. Choppers, AWACS and a blimp will patrol the skies. A hear-all, see-all echolocation network of more than 1,400 cameras with cone-shape microphones will monitor sights and sounds around the city. "If there's an explosion, we must be able to hear in real time," explains Giorgos Floridis, minister of Public Order.

For months, a group of representatives from seven nations—the United States, Britain, Australia, Spain, Israel, France and Ger-

many—have been helping Athens anticipate threats, train counterterrorist forces and seal the country's porous ports and borders. These will be the first Summer Olympics since 9/11—and the first in a borderless Europe, where travelers from cities such as Paris or Rome can fly into Athens without showing an identity document. Safeguarding the Games remains a huge issue for Washington, the largest foreign contributor to the security operation. Just last month the United States closed its consulate in Thessaloniki due to an unspecified security threat. As the American ambassador to Greece, Thomas Miller, told reporters: "I do nothing but security."

The Athens Games will be the world's biggest—and most expensive—peacetime security operation ever. "We're paying the price for September 11," says Athens Mayor Dora Bakoyianni. Of \$5.8 billion that Greece has

budgeted for the Olympics, at least \$825 million will be spent on security—three times the amount spent in 2000 in Sydney. The task is many times more complex, too. Greece is a stone's throw from such strife-torn regions as the Balkans and Middle East. Don't forget the geography of Athens itself: a basin with nearly 5 million people living in thousands of apartment complexes, all surrounded by hills. A Western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, called the layout "a sniper's dream."

International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge told reporters last month that "everything humanly possible" was being done to safeguard the Games. As in Sydney, organizers will employ a sophisticated computer model analyzing air currents over the Olympic park, geared to predict the dispersion of bio-chemical agents and determine which parts of the area might need to be evacuated. Still, Rogge confessed that "nothing is 100 percent foolproof." As recently as late last year, confidential reports circulating among U.S. and other international officials cited numerous Greek security flaws during counterterrorism exercises conducted last August. First reported in *The Washington Post*, the lapses included a young woman posing as a pregnant mother who managed to carry fake explosives, hidden in a belly pouch, past guards at one of the Olympic checkpoints.

Greece's vulnerability to maritime threats is a special worry. "Remember the USS Cole," says one Western expert familiar with the security preparations, referring to the 2000 attack on the U.S. Navy warship moored in Yemen. Greece has a 13,676-kilometer coastline and thousands of tiny islands; in 1988 armed Palestinian extremists took control of a ferry in Athens, killing nine people. Another security snafu during a drill last year allowed counterterrorist agents to board a ferry in the main port of Piraeus and plant a mock bomb. To protect the coastline, the Greek Defense Ministry announced that the U.S. Sixth Fleet will stand guard offshore, while ships from neighboring Italy and Turkey will patrol the Ionian and Aegean seas.

Even the best-prepared Olympics can have hairy moments—as Sydney's did. One alarm went off in March 2000, when New Zealand police in Auckland launched what they thought would be a routine raid on an Afghan people-smuggling syndicate. But they immediately contacted their Australian counterparts when they discovered a map of the Lucas Heights nuclear research reactor outside Sydney—near the Olympic stadium—with access routes marked and notes on police security.

Even then, Australian authorities' biggest fear was the apocalyptic Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, whose 1995 sarin gas attack

in the Tokyo subway killed 12 and injured 5,000. Aum Shinrikyo members had dabbled in chemical and biological agents such as Ebola and VX for years—and had tested sarin on a wheat farm in Perth in 1993. Australia's Olympic organizers bought up stocks of atropine, an antidote to certain nerve agents, to defend against a sarin attack. Some even considered stashing an atropine injector under each seat in the Olympic Stadium, though ultimately the idea was ruled out. "We looked at scenarios like a crop-duster spreading sarin over the opening ceremony," says retired Brig. Adrian D'Hage, former head of Defense Planning Security for the Sydney Games.

Greek workers are scrubbing marble stadiums and arranging potted flowers to try to spruce up the city and ensure it "won't look like a military zone," says Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, head of the Athens organizing committee. But even getting



FIVE-RING CIRCUS: Greece races to get ready (above), a counterterrorist unit (left)

Olympic projects finished on time could be a white-knuckle ride. After winning their bid in 1997, Greek authorities got off to a poor start due to strikes, property disputes, environmental protests and even archeological finds. Now, organizers fervently hope the main Olympic stadium will be done a month and a half before the Aug. 13 opening ceremony. Some of the construction delays are due to extraordinary security enhancements, such as a concrete wall intended to shield 16,500 athletes and officials in the Olympic Village from suicide bombings. The mayor of Athens likened the city to an underdog in a marathon race who "bursts ahead in the final laps, surprising the world and, perhaps, even himself." Problem is, in the security world, nobody likes surprises.

With MELISSA ROBERTS in Sydney