

EUROPEAN NEWS

World's most elusive terrorists go on trial

BY DANIEL HOWDEN
in Athens

GREECE'S TERRORISM trial of the century began in turmoil yesterday when judges ordered a bullet-proof glass cage for defendants to be dismantled because of complaints that it breached their rights.

Nineteen suspected members of November 17, formerly one of the world's most elusive urban guerrilla groups, are accused of charges from murder to armed robbery relating to three decades of violence.

Judges struggled to control proceedings in the noisy courtroom in Athens' Korydallos prison while more than 150 lawyers tried to be heard over the throng of relatives – of the victims and the accused – and hundreds of journalists.

Silence finally fell when Dimitris Koufodinas, allegedly the chief November 17 assassin, nicknamed Poison Hand, shouted that he could not hear the judges through the glass. Prosecutors backed the suspect's complaint and proceedings were halted for several hours while the £1.4m three-sided cage was removed.

The case has reinforced Greece's shaky standing on security before the 2004 Olympics to be hosted in Athens, and touched everyone from the Orthodox priest whose three sons are in the dock to the reclusive Latsis family, billionaires who allegedly bought their way off the hit-list.

A terrorism bill amended the right to trial by jury, leav-



Alexandros Giotopoulos, right, is accused of leading the November 17 guerrilla group *Simela Pantzartzi/EPA*

ing November 17 suspects facing a panel of three judges.

Fittingly, the proceedings are in a makeshift courtroom on the site where Greece's fallen junta was tried in 1975. The same year, November 17 announced its arrival by shooting dead Richard Welch, the head of the CIA's Athens bureau, outside his home. That was the first killing in a 27-year campaign of assassinations, which included American and

Turkish diplomats, military personnel industrialists and prominent judges. Two Britons, Costas Peratikos and Stephen Saunders, were also victims.

Heather Saunders, the wife of Brigadier Saunders, the defence attaché shot dead in 2000, sat stony-faced while the legal arguments went on. "I have just arrived. It's still early to comment," she said.

The Greek government has provoked a furious dispute with

domestic media by barring live radio or television coverage to avoid "television cannibalism". Christos Protopapas, a government spokesman, rejected criticism of media censorship. "This is not a show," he said.

Named after the student movement that contributed to the downfall of the colonels' regime, the radical leftists once seemed to kill with impunity. They robbed banks and post offices to generate funds and

raided military installations for weapons. Police floundered, unable to make a single arrest. Analysts produced profiles of a complex organisation with independently functioning cells.

The end came with the intervention of Scotland Yard – after the killing of Brigadier Saunders – which helped the Greek police by overhauling their outdated methods.

An icon painter with no previous criminal record was

found with a shattered hand at the scene of an attempted bombing in June last year. Under sedation for his wounds, Savvas Xiros began to talk and November 17 unravelled.

Arrests began all over the country – including a helicopter swoop on an island to whisk away Alexandros Giotopoulos, the alleged mastermind, who denies the charges. Among the defendants are Savvas' brothers Christodoulos and Vassilis. The Rev Triantafylos Xiros, their father, said: "They will go to jail, and they must repent."

By September, when Mr Koufodinas, an amateur beekeeper and allegedly the second in command, handed himself in to police, a clear picture of the organisation had emerged. Entrenched theories that it was made up of secret-agent hitmen or had protectors among governing Socialists were shattered. A surprisingly amateur profile emerged.

A procession of Greece's wealthy elite is expected to attend proceedings in the coming weeks as investigations continue into a related blackmail scam involving a right-wing publisher. Grigoris Michalopoulos has been charged with extorting money by posing as an intermediary for November 17, claiming to be able to remove names from their hit-lists. He has denied the charge. Victims of the scam are said to include the family of Gianna Angelopoulos, head of the Olympics organisers, and Yiannis Latsis, a wealthy shipowner and friend of the Prince of Wales.