

Athens Olympic dome threatened by delays

BY HARRY DE QUETTEVILLE
IN ATHENS

THE architectural showpiece of this summer's Olympics in Athens may have to be scrapped, a Games inspector has said.

With six months to go until the opening ceremony a 13,000-tonne, £80 million, steel-and-glass dome – designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava to slide into place over the main Olympic stadium and protect spectators from the fierce August sun – is lying half built amid dust and rubble.

The Greek government has promised that the fiendishly complex design, which involves sliding two 6,500-ton canopies along rails on a reinforced concrete beam, will be ready on time.

But Denis Oswald, the chief International Olympic Committee inspector to Athens, believes it may have to be sidelined.

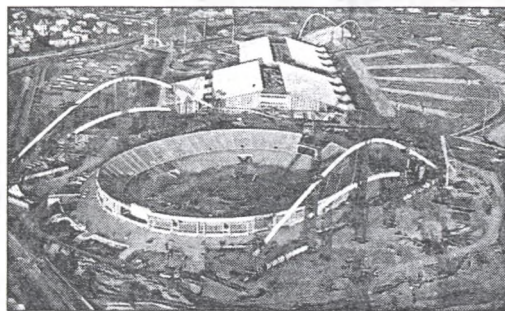
"It's very complicated and there is no space for unforeseen delays," he said. "But the Games can, if necessary, go ahead without this roof."

Scrapping the roof – the only showpiece construction of the Games – would be a major embarrassment to the organisers.

It is due to be completed six weeks before the start of the Games, but further delays appear inevitable.

The roof can be moved into place only on windless days. Most significantly, experts have been brought in at this late stage to examine whether the whole structure could stand any serious shocks in earthquake-prone Athens.

Further delays could also hamper preparations for the top-secret opening ceremony. With hundreds of workmen in welder's masks working triple



The Olympic stadium in Athens will host the athletics events

shifts to get the roof on, dancers and actors will have to rehearse for the event away from the stadium.

The delays are also drawing complaints from the company organising the television coverage of the Games, which is planning to make extensive use of the roof.

The Olympic stadium roof is just one of many building projects for which deadlines have been pushed back.

The firm renovating the Marathon route, which legend says was once run by the herald Phidippides to bring news of the Greek victory over the Persians in 490 BC, has announced bankruptcy, forcing the government to find other contractors.

The company's announcement means hopes of completing the route on time have – like Phidippides – died on the spot.

The Olympic Swimming Centre is also desperately behind schedule, and the International Water Sports Federation is reported to have fired off three written protests about the delays.

Once planned to be unveiled last autumn, it is now promised for the end of May. The tennis and eque-

tle of the Olympic miracle is yet visible and the first corners are being cut.

Landscapers who once dreamed of planting 17,000 trees around the Olympic Stadium will now only plant 9,000.

But Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, the president of the Athens Organising Committee, has hit back at the critics, saying it does not matter if projects are delayed, as long as they are delivered before August 13.

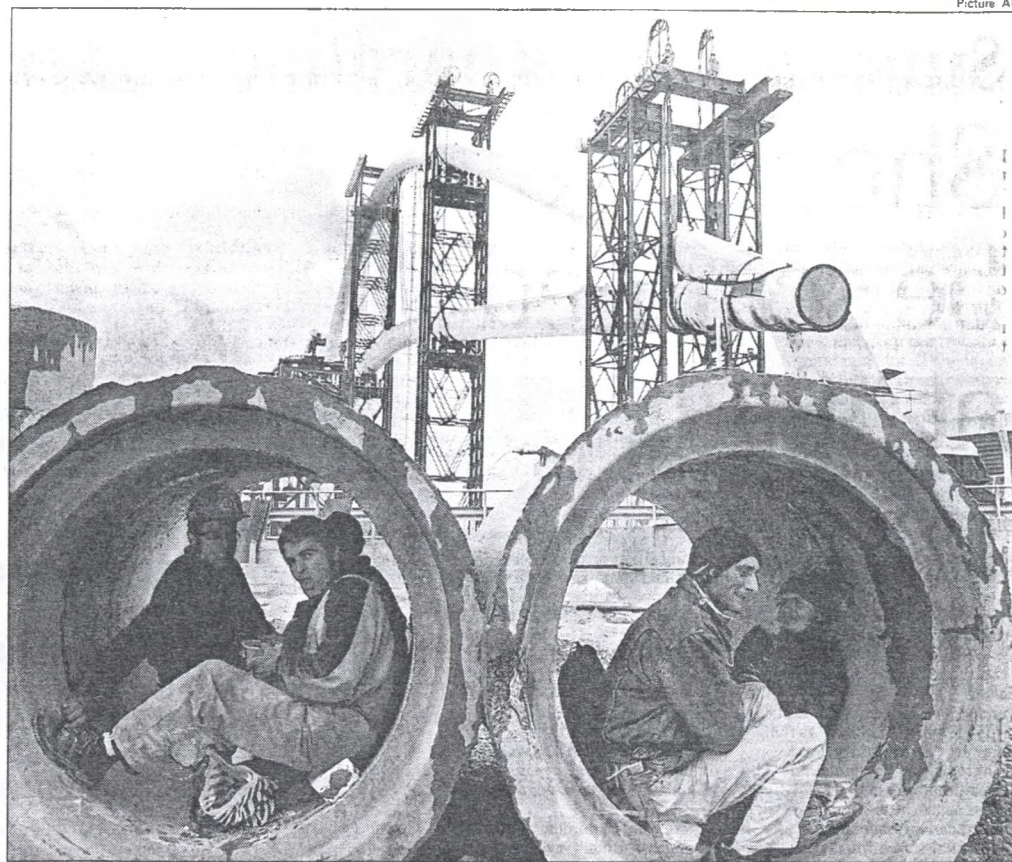
That is not good enough for the critics. "Our country won the bid to organise the Games in 1997. We knew the difficulties involved, we had all the time to assess the scope of the endeavour," the Right-wing *Kathimerini* newspaper wrote in an editorial yesterday.

"But the country was caught up in grandiose plans like Calatrava's roof and now we are struggling to find patchwork solutions to problems that were caused by our own frivolity and foot dragging."

trian centres, as well as the gymnastics, judo, wrestling, shooting, archery and volleyball arenas, have all been delayed. But some things have been delivered.

The Athens metro came into service in 2000 and the new international airport opened a year later, although the rail link between the airport and the city is not complete.

With deadlines looming lit-



Workmen take a break at the stadium. The construction of an £80 million glass dome roof has fallen behind schedule

Picture AP