British diplomat assassinated in Athens

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Two gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire on military attaché Brigadier Stephen Saunders in Athens as he was driving a white Rover belonging to the embassy along Kifissias Avenue, a major boulevard linking the centre of the city with the capital's prosperous northern suburbs. Saunders suffered four gunshot wounds to the abdomen before the gunmen fled. He was rushed to hospital, but died later of his injuries.

Saunders was on his way to a meeting about arms imports to Greece. Police said they believed the assassination was carried out by the November 17 guerrilla group. They claimed to have found four spent cartridges at the scene from a .45-calibre pistol, the type of weapon said to have been used by the November 17 group in 20 assassinations since 1975.

November 17 is assumed to be small—numbering less than 25 people—and possibly containing several members of the same family. No member has ever been arrested. It emerged during the mass movement against Greece's military junta, which came to power in 1967 and was deposed in 1975, and takes its name from the anti-Junta movement amongst students in 1973, crushed when the army sent tanks to an Athens university. November 17 opposes Greek participation in NATO and the European Union.

The first known action for which the group claimed responsibility was the December 1975 assassination of Richard Welch, the Central Intelligence Agency chief in Athens. November 17 said it killed Welch in protest against America's support for the military junta. It is claimed that since then November 17 has killed four other US diplomats.

In 1989 the group stole rockets from an army depot. It mounted assaults against US and British businesses in Greece during the Gulf War in 1990-91, killed a former state bank governor in 1994 and shipping tycoon Costis Peraticos in 1997. November 17 claimed responsibility for the May 1999 rocket attack on the Athens residence of German Ambassador Carl Heinz Kunha, a week after a similar attack on the Dutch ambassador at the start of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia. There was widespread opposition to NATO's actions in Greece.

The assassination is an acute embarrassment for the Panhellic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government of Prime Minister Costas Simitis. A report by the US State Department in May, “Patterns of Global Terrorism,” ranked Greece second only to Colombia for anti-American terrorist attacks in 1999 and named the November 17 group as the worst of over 80 terrorist groups. It cited 20 terrorist attacks against American targets in a 12-month period, a combined total of 40 strikes on US, French and British holdings, 52 anti-American protest marches and seven rocket attacks.

The report alleged the existence of a "culture of impunity" in Athens due to the "absence of strong public government leadership and initiatives to improve police capabilities". The US State Department spends more on diplomatic security in Athens than anywhere else in the world. Simitis will be under diplomatic pressure to act more decisively against November 17 and similar groups, weeks after only narrowly winning a General election in April due to the unpopularity of his party's austerity and privatisation measures.

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