Greece: Athens hit by bomb blasts

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Three bomb blasts in Athens on Wednesday, May 5, appear not to have harmed anyone, but they triggered panic as the Greek capital prepares to host the World Olympics in 99 days.

Government officials rushed forward to declare that the explosions, just outside a police station in the central district of Kalithea, had nothing to do with the August 13-29 sporting event.

Ahead of any investigation, and with no organisation having accepted responsibility for the blasts, Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis declared the bombs to be "an isolated incident that does not affect whatsoever the country's preparations for the safety of the Olympics."

"The Greek people's efforts and their close cooperation with the relevant authorities in the European Union, NATO and the United States guarantee the safety of the Athens Olympic Games," he continued.

An Athens newspaper apparently received an anonymous telephone warning about 10 minutes before the early morning blasts, which were described as "medium"-sized. Windows were shattered, and buildings in the immediate vicinity—said to include several hotels to be used by Olympic officials—damaged by the explosions, which were apparently staggered so as to catch out those responding to the first.

A fourth bomb was discovered and detonated by security services.

Early reports indicated that a policeman had been injured, but this was later revised to state that no one had been harmed.

Somewhat bizarrely, government representatives rushed to reassure the world that the bombings were the product of domestic unrest rather than international terrorism.

Karamanlis and his right-wing Partei Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy Party) were only elected March 7, and are anxious to disprove allegations that Athens is unprepared to host the Olympics and that it is not sufficiently vigilant against the possibility of terror attacks by Islamic fundamentalists.

Many building projects are behind schedule, with construction workers having to do triple shifts, "to turn night time into day" as a government spokesman put it, in an effort to complete on time.

The main Athens Olympic Park is a building site, whilst delays have meant plans to place a roof over the competition swimming pool have had to be abandoned, leading to complaints of unbearable temperatures in the midday sun. Transport links to and from the major sites from outside the city are also unfinished.

The Greek government plans a security operation costing an estimated 1 billion euros ($1.2 billion), including citywide surveillance cameras and aerial patrols.

Some 45,000 armed guards are to patrol Athens, three times the number deployed in Sydney for the 2000 games. Public Order Minister George Voulgarakis is currently in Washington, along with the head of the Greek police, to finalise security arrangements.

US athletes are to be accompanied by US federal agents, and the Greek authorities state that they will also provide 24-hour armed guards to US, British and Israeli athletes. They have also requested help from NATO to assist with air and sea patrols.

Also in preparation for the games, the Greek authorities have been involved in a widespread clampdown against domestic opposition, including anarchist and guerrilla groups.

In November 2002, 19 members of the November 17 group were convicted for the deaths of some 23 people. A group calling itself Revolutionary Struggle claimed responsibility for a bomb blast in September of last year, which damaged an Athens court. Subsequently, security forces have made a series of arrests and claim to have prevented planned attacks on the Athens

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