

Riots break out in Greece after police shoot 15-year-old boy

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Nationwide rioting has broken out in Greece after police shot dead a 15-year-old boy in Athens. Rioting began in the capital and quickly spread to the northern city of Thessaloniki and even to the islands of Crete and Corfu.

More than 1,000 people protested in Greece's second city, Thessaloniki. The protestors attacked department stores, banks, police stations and other public buildings. Riots were also reported in the university towns of Patras, Komotini, Heraklion Ioannina and Chania on Crete.

In Athens, the rioting quickly spread to Monistiraki, one of the main tourist districts, and to Ermou, a major shopping street. Buildings next to the ancient monument of Hadrian's Library were burning on Sunday morning.

Sunday saw renewed demonstrations and clashes with the police. Police fired tear gas into a crowd in Thessaloniki that chanted, "Murderers in uniform."

At least 20 stores were burnt out, according to the Athens fire service.

"We've never seen anything like this," an anonymous senior police officer told reporters. "The tension is so thick you can almost cut it with a knife."

Two police officers have been arrested and one senior precinct officer suspended in connection with the shooting of the boy, according to the Greek authorities.

The boy, Andreas Grigoropoulos, was killed in the Exarchia district of Athens at about 10 p.m. on Saturday. His death was followed by rioting as protestors sent text messages to rally support.

Police allege that he was one of a group of youths who were throwing stones at a police car. One police officer is alleged to have fired a stun grenade, and another got out of the car with a gun and shot the boy in the chest. Witnesses claim that the police officer took aim at the boy. One witness took a video of the incident. The boy died before he arrived at hospital.

On Sunday afternoon, several thousand people gathered to march to the main Athens police station. John Gelis, a 28-year-old psychologist, described the mood. "The feeling is anger. A kid was killed just like that. It's a sign of arrogance by the police. It's an act against democracy."

Exarchia is home to the Polytechnic, the university that was the centre of opposition to the military junta that ruled Greece until 1974. The army stormed the Polytechnic with tanks on November 17, 1973, killing 40 protesting students.

Feelings were already tense because of this anniversary. Clashes took place between demonstrators and the police outside the US embassy in November.

The Polytechnic sits in a deprived working class and student district where many of the youth identify themselves as anarchists. The incident in which the boy was killed was one of many clashes between local youth and the police in recent months. Social tensions have reached a peak because of the growing division between the rich and poor in Greek society.

The police normally exercise a policy of caution in Exarchia. "The police stay out of certain areas, unless there's a major emergency, and the anarchists don't trash things badly unless there's a good reason," Brady Kiesling, a former US diplomat, told reporters. But "once

someone gets killed, the doctrine is massive retaliation.”

The last fatal shooting of a minor in Greece took place in 1985. That also sparked off extensive rioting. It lasted for several months. The latest incidents are the most severe rioting since 1999, when demonstrators protesting at President Clinton's visit clashed with police. The *Financial Times* suggests that the riots are the worst since the Second World War.

Social tensions have been sharpened by the economic programme of the conservative New Democracy government of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis. The political standing of the government has been further tarnished by a land scandal.

Social conditions for the majority of the population are dominated by rising inflation and high unemployment. The government is under pressure from Brussels to cut its budget deficit, which is higher than that allowed in the Eurozone. Karamanlis has embarked on a programme of attacking pensions and job security. His measures have sparked off a number of strikes. The government has attempted to divert social tensions into ethnic rivalries by targeting refugees and migrants.

While the majority of the population are suffering deteriorating social conditions, a small minority are benefiting from land speculation. Recent wildfires have been associated with developers who want to build hotels and holiday complexes in protected forest land.

Two senior ministers have been forced to resign over a scandal involving a land swap by a Greek Orthodox monastery. Karamanlis, who has only a two-seat majority, refused to accept the resignation of his interior minister after the boy's shooting.



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