

Centrelink help for Greek Pensioners

Minister for Human Services, Senator Joe Ludwig, urged thousands of pensioners to return their Greek Old Age Pension forms to Centrelink, or miss out on the extra income.

The social security agreement between Australia and Greece came into effect on 1 October 2008.

"Australian Age Pension customers who have spent part of their working life in Greece, may be entitled to additional money through a Greek pension," Senator Ludwig said.

"During October, Centrelink sent 56,000 letters to customers in Australia and Greece whose records suggested they might be eligible to receive a Greek pension under the Agreement," Senator Ludwig said.

"Customers have nine weeks from the date on the letter to return their forms."

So far, 43,500 people have responded by returning a claim form or contacting Centrelink to explain why they are not entitled to a Greek pension.

"That means about 12,500 customers still haven't returned their forms to Centrelink."

"I encourage you to send your details to Centrelink now so you don't miss out on the additional money, and risk suspension of your Australian Age Pension."

Senator Ludwig warned Centrelink was required by law to consider suspending payment of the Australian Age Pension if people failed to return the claim form.

"The Australian Age Pension is subject to an income and assets test, including overseas pensions," he said.

"If you received a Greek pension claim form

from Centrelink, it's important that you return it as soon as possible, or contact Centrelink to discuss whether a claim needs to be lodged."

"I understand you may find it hard to recall all the details of your work history, but I urge you to get your form in as soon as possible."

In order to make the process as easy as possible, Centrelink is drawing on the Centrelink Multicultural Call centre, which has dedicated staff fluent in Greek to help customers understand and meet the requirements.

Anyone who would like help from Centrelink to complete the form should contact Centrelink International Services on 13 1673, or Centrelink Multicultural Call on 13 1202 to speak to someone in Greek.



The Christmas tree...

The lights decorating a new Christmas tree in Syntagma Square were switched on last night by Athens Mayor Nikitas Kaklamanis in a ceremony that included fireworks and music by the municipal band and choir. The original tree was set alight and destroyed during last week's rioting in central Athens. Wooden boxes that had been made to look like Christmas presents were also damaged in the violence but have now been replaced. Kaklamanis said that the return of the Christmas tree to the square was a sign that the city would not bow to 'the terrorism of those wearing hoods.'

Greek prime minister accepts 'share of blame'



Costas Karamanlis, Greek prime minister, said he accepted "a share of the blame" in a corruption scandal involving a Mount Athos monastery that has contributed to continuing social unrest 11 days after the killing of a teenager by police.

Mr Karamanlis said he failed to appreciate the seriousness of events at Vatopedi, a wealthy Orthodox monastery which exchanged tracts of farmland in northern Greece for state-owned property in Athens.

The Vatopedi deal, carried out under the auspices of a state-owned real estate company, undervalued

the Athens properties by almost €200m, according to evidence presented to parliamentary hearings over the past three months.

"I know that this scandal has caused distress to many people ... and I promise that we will take every possible measure to make sure nothing like this can happen again," Mr Karamanlis said.

But a parliamentary committee investigating the scandal led by members of the governing New Democracy party, ruled on Tuesday there were no grounds for prosecuting politicians – an outcome that is likely to fuel renewed street protests.

In northern Greece, farmers blocked the main highway to central Europe for several hours in protest against low product prices and increasing costs for inputs.

Trade unions and students plan more protests this week as parliament debates the 2009 budget this week.

The growth rate is projected to fall from 3.2 per cent to around 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product next year, but the country is not expected to fall into recession.

However the government has little margin for increasing spending on education and social benefits in response to the unrest following a sharp rise in debt financing costs.

Spreads on Greek 10-year bonds this week touched 200 basis points above the equivalent rate for German bunds, the benchmark for lenders.

Greece Welcomes Return of Byzantine Icon

ATHENS—Britain returned a 14th century Byzantine icon to Greek authorities last month, 30 years after it was stolen from a monastery in northern Greece, the Culture Ministry said.

The painting of Christ being taken down from the Cross was snatched from a monastery in the city of Serres in 1978 and discovered in 2002 in the hands of a Greek collector in London.

A British court ruled this year the valuable painting should be returned to Greece, dismissing an appeal from its owner.

"Days like these are days of joy for all the people struggling to rescue our cultural inheritance," Culture Minister Michalis Liapis said. "The icon stolen from the St. John the Baptist monastery will be returned to the place it was seized."

Greece's conservative government has launched a campaign to recover ancient artifacts and religious art smuggled out of the country and acquired by foreign museums and private collectors.

Top of this list are the Parthenon Marbles, part of the frieze that once adorned the 5th century B.C. temple of Athena on the Acropolis in central Athens.

The sculptures were taken to Britain in the early 19th century by Thomas Bruce, seventh earl of Elgin and British



ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, which then ruled Greece.

Liapis said the Byzantine icon would need restoration as it was painted over before it was smuggled out of Greece. The government would also ensure security at the monastery was tight enough to prevent a recurrence of the theft.

"The Culture Ministry does not encourage domestic 'Elginism,'" he said. The icon will be displayed for two weeks at the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens.