



Wife pays 30m euro for freedom of Greek tycoon Pericles Panagopoulos

A Greek shipping tycoon was freed after eight days in captivity yesterday when his family paid his kidnappers an estimated 30 million Euro (£28 million) in ransom.

Pericles Panagopoulos, 74, was found by the crew of a police car sitting at a deserted outdoor cafe closed for the winter a few miles outside Athens, near Dafni, a working-class district. Returning from a routine call, they stopped only because they thought that he might be an inmate of the adjacent Dafni mental hospital.

"The first thing he asked for was a mobile telephone to call his wife," a police statement said.

After a few hours' rest Mr Panagopoulos, who suffers from diabetes and has a potentially serious heart condition, was being debriefed by the police.

During his captivity the authorities appealed to the kidnappers to treat him kindly because of his frail health.

The kidnappers had been careful to keep him well supplied with insulin and other medication that the police said had been bought from a chemist's in Levadia.

The freed man said that he had been hooded, bound and stuffed into the boot of a car and then driven around for more than an hour before being taken out.

At some point he had found it hard to breathe and pounded on the boot for help.

The response from one of his abductors, he said, was: "Don't worry, Pericles, your ordeal is over."

"I'm very happy to be home, as you can understand," Mr Panagopoulos told reporters. "As you can see I am well...though a little dazed still."

The release came after a tiring day for Katerina, Mr Panagopoulos's wife, who had to travel hundreds of miles with the ransom money before depositing it somewhere near the town of Levadia, 70 miles northwest of Athens.

She had shouldered almost all the burden of the secret negotiations with the kidnappers, who initially had demanded 40 million euro. George Sardelis, the magnate's driver - who was seized with his boss on January 12 but freed shortly afterwards bearing the ransom demand - also played a part.

"I'm more in need of a hospital than my husband is," a relieved but tired Mrs Panagopoulos told television reporters ear-

ly yesterday.

There were widely varying estimates in the Greek media about the ransom, ranging from 30 million euro to 100 million euro.

Without confirming reports of a 30 million euro ransom, a police source said that the sum was the largest ever known to have been paid in a Greek kidnapping case.

The police, who have a patchy record at best in kidnapping cases, appeared to have taken little or no part in the negotiations.

Ever since last month's riots in Athens, caused by the fatal shooting of a teenage boy, the police have tried to avoid all publicity.

The unrest and recent criminal activity - it was the second kidnapping of a prominent business figure in less than six months - have done little to enhance the reputation of the Greek police, who are considered a corrupt, ineffective and often brutal organisation.

A hunt for the kidnappers was under way yesterday as concerns mounted that the Balkan underworld, which is very active in Greece, had developed a taste for the crime.

Roadblocks were set up at the northern approaches to Athens and border posts were ordered to search all outgoing vehicles.

AUSTRALIA'S MOST WANTED

Some of the country's most dangerous criminals are at large and the price on their heads is getting higher



WANTED FOR: double murder
ON THE RUN: nine years
REWARD: \$200,000

ACCUSED DOUBLE MURDERER James Dalamangas has not been seen since he fled Australia by sea using a false passport in 1999. He vanished days after he allegedly knifed to death truck driver and father of two George Giannopoulos at a nightclub in Sydney's Belmore. The victim had been trying to break up a fight between patrons of the club.

Dalamangas had shot to notoriety the previous year when his brother Peter died after a brawl with bouncers at Sydney's Star City Casino.

Even then it seems James was no stranger to violent encounters. Police believe he's responsible for the murder of club bouncer Tim Voukelatos, who was shot five times in the face, neck and chest as he sat in his car outside a house in Campsie in Sydney in 1997.

There is no justice for the families of his alleged victims while Dalamangas, now 38, remains at large. They fear he is "liv-

ing it up" in Greece by taking advantage of the misguided kindness of friends and family.

Last year the reward for the capture of the accused killer doubled to \$200,000 after pressure from the family of victim George Giannopoulos. George's sister Toula begged the NSW government to match the reward offered for drug kingpin Tony Mokbel, caught after the reward for information leading to his capture had been boosted to \$1 million.

"They got Mokbel after the authorities put a \$1 million reward on his head and he was only on the run for a year", said Toula. If they match the bounty somebody will turn him in.

In February 2007 it was reported that Dalamangas has run out of money in Greece and was calling on family and friends in Sydney for help. Police believe he's put on weight and changes the colour of his hair.

Obama sworn in as US president

Barack Obama took the oath of office to become the first black president in US history, proclaiming America had chosen "hope over fear" and must unite in a "new era of responsibility" to triumph over its multiple crises. Witnessed by a huge crowd of more than two million people in an unprecedented endorsement of a new leader, Obama, 47, became the 44th President of the United States as he took the oath of office at the US Capitol. "I, Barack Hussein Obama, do solemnly swear that I will execute the office of President of the United States faithfully and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the constitution of the United States, so help me God," said Obama, sparking a massive roar from the crowd and a 21-gun salute. In his inaugural address, Obama gave notice that an era of economic "greed and irresponsibility" was over as he pledged swift and bold action to kickstart the world's biggest economy. "Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. He also said the United States would join other nations in rolling back "the spectre of a warming planet". Many among the crowd on the National Mall, estimated by the Washington Post at two million people, wept as the new president spoke.

