

# Small Greek island is migrants' gateway to Europe



## Gunmen shoot dead Greek anti-terrorist policeman

ATHENS (Reuters) - Two gunmen shot dead a Greek anti-terrorist policeman guarding a witness in Athens on Wednesday then fled on a motorcycle, police said.

In the worst attack since riots in December launched a wave of urban guerrilla violence in Greece, the 41-year-old officer was shot several times at close range and died in his car in the densely populated Patissia area of Athens.

"It was a cold-blooded murder ... they just drew their guns and murdered him," police spokesman Panagiotis Stathis told reporters at the scene.

The recent violence has rocked Greece's conservative government, clinging to a one-seat majority in parliament as its popularity plummets, mainly as a result of a slowing economy.

The early morning attack was similar to the shooting of a policeman in January, claimed by the Revolutionary Struggle urban guerrillas, Greece's most militant leftist group. That officer survived the attack.

In Wednesday's shooting, the policeman and father of one child, had just taken over a shift guarding a witness involved in a case against an urban guerrilla group.

The unidentified attackers quickly disappeared in the streets of Patissia and a manhunt was launched in the area to locate them.

Police said there was no warning or any claim of responsibility for the attack, the latest of several against the police in Greece this year.

Leftist and anarchist guerrilla groups have launched a wave of violence against police, political and business targets since a policeman shot dead a teenager in Athens in December, prompting Greece's worst riots in decades.

There was no immediate reaction to the attack from the government.

**AGATHONISSI, Greece (AFP)** — *The azure waters of tiny Agathonissi are as inviting as Greece's other Aegean Sea islands, but here a coastguard flotilla, not tourist yachts, takes up most of the picturesque harbour.*

The island off Turkey's west coast has a permanent population of around 100 and welcomes at least double that number of tourists in the summer.

But it is also a magnet for thousands of illegal immigrants from Asia and Africa crossing these smuggler-infested waters that constitute the European Union's southeastern border.

"We've been coming here for about 16 years, and every year it gets worse," says Michael, a 60-year-old Briton preparing breakfast on board his yacht. "It's sad but something has to be done."

Last year alone, some 5,000 migrants -- 50 times the population -- were detained on Agathonissi, said local municipal councillor Stelios Kamitsis.

An EU summit in Brussels Thursday and Friday has pledged to address repeated calls from Greece and the other "frontline" states of Cyprus, Malta and Italy for help in securing maritime borders against the daily influx.

Last week, Athens' conservative government warned that immigration was pushing the country's resources to the limit. "Given the seriousness of the situation, a number of measures must be adopted without delay," Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis urged EU leaders.

Back on the Agathonissi island pier, a patrol boat has just arrived with a fresh load of bedraggled would-be immigrants, a group of 16 men, three women and a baby.

"This is Greece?" gasps Osef Ahmadi, an exhausted 25-year-old clutching a small bag of belongings. With him are his brother Ali, his wife Leyla and their baby daughter Mariam, aged one. They claim to be Afghan.

The small family left Afghanistan's Wardak province a month ago, paying 10,000 euros (14,000 dollars) for passage to the Turkish coast on a truck, says Osef.

As he speaks, the coast guards produce the slashed remains of an inflatable dinghy on which the migrants



entered Greek waters.

"We found them on the maritime border with Turkey, around three nautical miles from the island," says Dimitris Stratis, the harbour master of neighbouring Patmos island which has jurisdiction over the area.

"It's the usual story, they tore the dinghy so they would be rescued as castaways and avoid being arrested for illegal entry into Greece," he notes.

On the pier, police officers separate the men from the three women in the group. Lacking identity papers, the men are asked to give their name and those of their parents, their age and nationality. The women follow.

"Cheers, smile," says a policeman snapping their mugshots under the blazing mid-morning sun.

Based on the migrants' statements, the final tally reads: 19 Afghans and one Burmese, aged 15-30.

With the identification phase complete, the group are lined up and taken to a 30-square-metre (320-square-foot) warehouse near the harbour that will serve as their home for the coming days.

"How long will we stay here?" asks Roya Hosseini, a 28-year-old woman accompanied by her husband Javed. She is dressed in brightly-coloured clothes and wears no veil.

"I want to join my brother who lives in Italy, but they've taken our cellphone SIM cards," says 19-year-old Isaha Han, who is barefoot after losing his shoes in the boat. The warehouse only emptied a day earlier when a group of Pakistanis who slept inside for four days were removed and transferred to the nearby island of Samos that has a larger migrant reception centre.

A day later, another 50 migrants

fished out of the sea are brought here too.

"The state offered to build a reception centre on the island but we refused as it's bad for tourism," said councillor Kamitsis.

"Sometimes the migrants steal our goats but that's not important -- it's the diseases we're worried about," says the councillor's wife Chryssoula.

Brussels promised "a determined European response based on firmness, solidarity and shared responsibility", and stressed the need to beef up the Frontex border agency conducting sea patrols, in a pre-summit statement.

But Athens already announced some of its own measures last week -- including beefed up penalties for people smugglers and extending maximum detention for migrants from the current three months to 12 -- to try to stem the influx.

In 2008, Greek coast guards arrested 15,315 migrants as they tried to enter the country illegally by boat, a 65 per cent spike over 2007, the merchant marine ministry said.

Thousands more have also died over the years trying to make sea crossings into the EU.

In all, more than 146,000 illegals were caught in Greece last year, up from the 122,000 arrested in 2007 and a huge increase over the 45,000 arrested in 2004, the interior ministry said.

Greek officials also blame Turkey for taking insufficient action to stem the outflow of clandestine migrants from its territory.

"We mount daily patrols but without Turkey's help the problem will not be solved," says the Patmos harbour master.

