

KORYDALLOS PRISON: A WINDOW ON GREECE RECENT PAST

ATHENS: With each passing generation, the squalid and overcrowded maximum-security Korydallos prison on the outskirts of Athens welcomes a new breed of high-profile criminal—its roll-call of inmates serving as a window on Greece's tumultuous recent past. From members of the brutal military junta that ruled the country half a century ago, to left-wing rebels and neo-Nazi thugs—Korydallos has seen them all. But the latest twist in Greece's fortunes has brought a new type of criminal to the prison's cells: corrupt politicians. Chief among them is Akis Tsochatzopoulos, 73, a founding member of the Greek socialist party and a senior minister for nearly two decades. He was sentenced in October to 20 years in prison over kickbacks received in connection with arms purchases during his tenure as defense minister. Tsochatzopoulos and other white-collar criminals are jailed in a section nicknamed the "VIP" ward by the Greek press, away from the murderers and rapists in the general population. Their ward has filled up as public outrage over decades of graft and financial malpractice has reached boiling point, forcing investigators to take action.

The former defense minister shares the ward with several of his former aides, a star banker whose institution was bailed out in 2011 and a football boss convicted of match-fixing. "Korydallos is considered the most secure prison in the country, which is why you get all these different groups in one place," said Tsochatzopoulos' lawyer, Yiannis Pagoropoulos. "It's an explosive mix, especially given the pitiful conditions of inmates." The prison is certainly a step down from the luxury enjoyed by some of its new elite residents. Korydallos currently holds 2,500 inmates, twice its intended capacity.

The situation is worst in the prison hospital, where patients complain that overcrowding has led to the spread of tuberculosis, scabies and other infectious diseases. In mid-

February, a group of inmates started a hunger strike to protest "hellish" conditions at the hospital, which they called a "human dumping ground". It holds around 200 patients—three times the number it was designed to accommodate. Many are HIV positive and say care is rudimentary. The outcry forced the justice ministry into an extraordinary pledge to release all those suffering from terminal or debilitating diseases such as cancer, multiple sclerosis and AIDS, provided they are serving sentences of 10 years or less.



ATHENS: Prisoners in Korydallos Prison, Greece's biggest, stand at windows during a protest by left-wing groups in support of inmates at the overcrowded prison hospital in western Athens. — AP

Extremists and neo-Nazis

Not all the new entrants to the VIP ward could be considered white-collar. In October, the leader of Greece's neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, Nikos Michaloliakos, arrived with several of his party's members of parliament. The group is accused of orchestrating attacks on immigrants and political opponents. A crackdown was finally ordered after the killing of a

well-known anti-fascist rapper in September by a Golden Dawn cadre. A third of the party's parliamentarians are now behind bars, awaiting trial. They are just the latest in a roll-call of high-profile radicals to grace the cells of Korydallos. Originally conceived in the 1960s as a simple holding facility for those awaiting trial, the site half an hour west of Athens soon became home to a who's who of Greece's most notorious criminals, from mobsters to murderers to deadly extremists. "Korydallos is the metropolis of the Greek correctional sys-

tem—all criminals have passed through here at some point," said Spyros Karakitsos, head of the association of Greek prison staff Osye.

Among its most famous inmates were the senior officers of the 1967-1974 military dictatorship, who spent the rest of their lives inside its walls. The last passed away last year. The prison acquired new notoriety in the early 2000s when more than a dozen members of

the deadly extremist group November 17 were tried and convicted on the premises, inside a makeshift court created specially for the occasion.

A second-generation extremist outfit called Conspiracy of Fire Nuclei, that sent parcel bombs to embassies and political leaders, followed suit in 2009. Some have questioned the wisdom of housing criminals and extremists side by side. "The cohabitation of common criminals and extremists is a major problem and contrary to European regulations," a security source said on condition of anonymity.

Helicopter breakout

To deal with the overpopulation, which is a chronic feature in most of Greece's prisons, the prison operators bend the rules to keep the situation under control. Last month, the warden was sacked after it emerged that one of November 17's top hitmen had been allowed to mix with members of the Conspiracy outfit in a different section of the prison, and hang out in their cells. The November 17 shooter, Christodoulos Xiros, was then given a nine-day furlough in January and promptly disappeared, only to resurface two weeks later with a self-made video calling for anti-government attacks.

Karakitsos, the guard unionist, says staff cuts have compromised security at the prison. "I am ashamed about conditions at Korydallos," he said. "There are so many inmates that at this rate, we'll have to lodge them in the courtyard." As well as the hunger strikes, hostage situations and jailbreaks are not uncommon at Korydallos. The most spectacular breakout occurred in 2009, when a Greek bank robber and an Albanian hitman escaped from the prison courtyard using a hijacked helicopter. It was an embarrassing *deja vu* for the prison authorities, as the pair had previously pulled the same airborne stunt in 2006, before being recaptured. — AFP

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