

DIPLOMATIC DISPATCHES

Nora Boustany

A Fighter Readies Athens for the Olympics

**W**ith the deep, gravelly voice of a diva, the dimples of a debutante and the stature of an imposing Greek goddess, **Dora Bakoyannis**, the mayor of Athens, has taken on the challenge of a lifetime: hosting one of the largest Olympic Games ever.

Bakoyannis, 50, is taking her countrymen along on the journey, a colossal undertaking whose results she promises will outlive the Summer Games.

Athenians are racing to modernize a crowded old city and upgrade the transportation system while showcasing the ancient and distinctive character of Athens, all the while mindful of the security challenge the Games pose.

"I am paid to be nervous," Bakoyannis joked. Aides said she has been working 12- and 14-hour days to make it all happen.

Bakoyannis is the eldest of four children born to **Constantine Mitsotakis**, who was prime minister from 1990 to 1993 and leader of the New Democracy party. When she was a child, her father, then a member of Parliament, was briefly jailed after a military coup. He and the family fled the country when Bakoyannis was 14, traveling to Venice and eventually settling in Paris. She already spoke German and French but felt uprooted in her new school, where no one spoke Greek. She went to college in Munich and studied communications and political science.

When military rule collapsed in 1974, the family returned to Greece, and she followed. She married **Pavlos Bakoyannis**, a vocal opposition journalist and intellectual who had also returned from exile. He became a member of Parliament, representing the mountainous region of Evritania, but was gunned down in 1989 by members of the November 17 terrorist group, who confessed in court last December that they had singled him out because his writings had helped unify Greek political parties.

She learned about the assassination minutes after it happened. Her children, **Alexia** and **Kostas**, heard the news on the radio as they were riding the bus to school. "This is one of the



Athens Mayor Dora Bakoyannis, in charge of preparations for the Summer Olympics, says she is "paid to be nervous."

worst aspects of public life," she said. During such times, she said, "you are in a corner and you feel like you can disappear, or you can fight."

She decided to run for her husband's seat, won and was reelected to Parliament three times. In 1998, she married a Greek shipping magnate, **Isidoros Kouvelos**, who she said has been supportive of her endeavors and patient with her schedule. "It was the best thing that happened to me after my children. It is important to have a second chance," she said.

After her landslide victory as mayor in 2002, a deranged man shot at her from 25 yards as she was getting into her car at the foot of the Acropolis. "I could have been dead," she said, but she was saved because she had stooped to pick up her handbag—which she had flung into the car while calling her husband on her cell phone. Another second chance. Her driver was shot in the neck but survived.

Bakoyannis has also served as minister of culture and as her father's chief of staff when he was prime minister. She likes to dance, sing and cook, and her only regret is not to have had more children.

But life's tragedies have changed her, she said. "When you go through that pain, you know how to value your good moments," she said, pulling out a small box of cigarillos. "In very

difficult moments, one of the best remedies is work."

One of her main hurdles in preparing for the Olympics has been overcoming her impatience while dealing with countless bureaucracies.

Greece's budget for the Games is \$4.5 billion for infrastructure and \$1.2 billion for security and public order. The 18,000-ton steel-and-glass roof of the main Olympic stadium designed by Spanish architect **Santiago Calatrava** is complete and sliding into position. Streets have been dug up, subway tunnels excavated and the tracks and wiring for a brand new electric tramway have been laid.

"We won some bets already," she told Washington Post editors and reporters over lunch Monday about the determination of Athenians in the countdown to the Olympics.

Biometric identification measures to control access to the Games have been set up, 300,000 cameras have been installed in Athens and a 70,000-member security force is being trained. Telephone hot lines covering a range of needs from directions to medical or dental emergencies have been set up, and 3,000 multilingual volunteers will fan out to assist visitors.

Bakoyannis insisted there be a balance between the focus on security and the identity of the Games.

"We are all concerned about terrorism. . . . If we change our way of life, terrorists have won and we need to explain to people that life goes on. Terrorism is a big threat around the world, the most fascist way of thinking and exactly the opposite way of our thinking," she said.

The Olympics this summer should have a human dimension, she said. They should not just be about world records, money or buildings, but about values, ideas and respect for others.

"That is why they have survived for 3,000 years and why they still exist," she emphasized.

Her mission after the Games is to make Athens a diverse multicultural metropolis at a time when countries across Europe are trying to maintain their cultures while tearing down borders.

ΑΝΟΡΤΩΝΟ ΟΥΧΕΙ ΠΡΩΝ