

Greek MPs pass austerity plan amid protests

Greece's Parliament has passed a controversial package of austerity measures, demanded by the Eurozone and IMF in return for a 130bn-Euro bailout to avoid default

The vote was carried by 199 votes in favour, with 74 MPs voting against. Coalition parties expelled over 40 deputies for failing to back the bill. The vote came amid violent scenes in capital, Athens, and elsewhere, with protesters outside Parliament throwing stones and petrol bombs.

Police fired tear gas and several buildings were set on fire in Athens. Dozens of police officers and at least 37 protesters were injured, 23 suspected rioters were arrested and a further 25 detained. PM Lucas Papademos urged calm, saying violence had no place in a democracy. Lawmakers have also approved a related deal to write off 100bn Euros of Greek debt held by private banks.

Pasok, the largest party, and its coalition ally New Democracy — which have both backed the bill — account for more than 230 deputies out of a total of 300. Following the vote the parties announced

they had each expelled about 20 of the rebel MPs.

There is mounting public anger in Greece and a feeling that the impact on ordinary people is beyond the value of the bailout. As many as 80,000 people joined demonstrations in Athens, with another 20,000 protesting in Thessaloniki. Violent protests also spread to other Greek town and cities, including the holiday islands of Corfu and Crete. Protesters hurled flares and chunks of marble torn up from the square. Some had tried to break through a cordon of riot police around the Parliament. Several historic buildings, including cafes and cinemas, were set alight.

The austerity measures include 15,000 public-sector job cuts, liberalisation of labour laws, lowering the minimum wage by 20 percent from 751 Euros a month to 600 Euros, negotiating a debt write-off with banks.

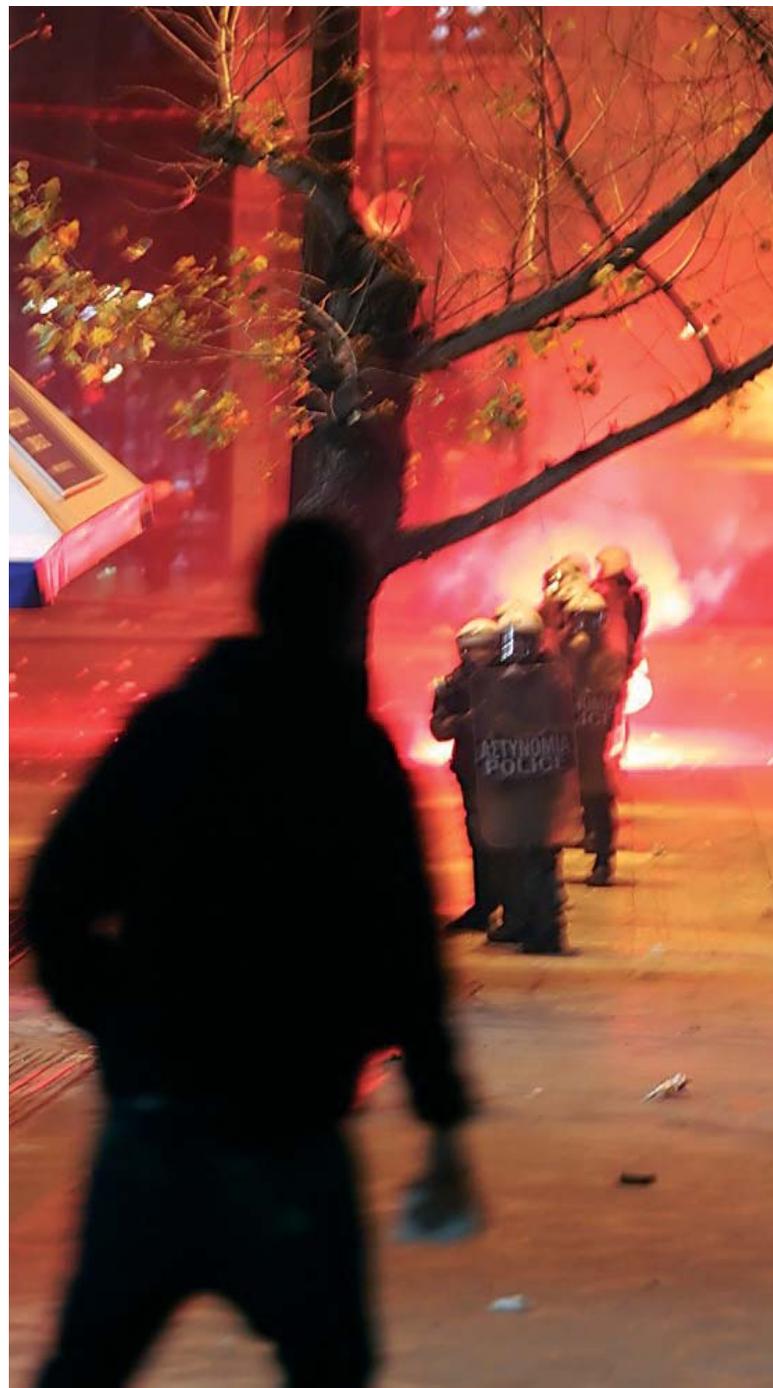
Mr. Papademos had earlier said

Greece did not have the luxury of such protests in such difficult times.

"Vandalism, violence and destruction have no place in a democratic country and won't be tolerated," he stressed. "From you and your vote it will depend if Greece will remain in the Euro or if it will be driven to an unruly default."

Finance Minister Evangelos Venizelos said the question was not 'whether some salaries and pensions will be curtailed, but whether we will be able to pay even these reduced wages and pensions.' "When you have to choose between bad and worse, you will pick what is bad to avoid what is worse," he said.

New Democracy leader Antonis Samaras, in turn, noted, "The dramatic events in the centre of Athens harm Greece and hurt all the Greek people. We have seen scenes that must not happen again in the future. I ask every Greek to show prudence, patriotism, calm, and unity."



Riot police stand by during a 48-hour anti-austerity strike

Winter freeze boosts food prices

Severe winter weather battering Europe is pushing up the cost of food, creating difficulties for growers

European wheat prices hit an almost eight month high on concerns about the damage to crops from the freezing conditions. In France, market gardeners said they have had to ratchet up the heating in greenhouses which is costly.

Fruit grower Guillaume Seguin said, "In the past times, we've been seeing temperatures as low as minus 13, minus 14 degrees, especially in the morning. The temperatures have been below freezing even during the day."

In freezing conditions, harvesting those crops that survive is more difficult. In southern Europe particularly, which is not used to this kind of weather, it has been hard to transporting



Winter weather in Europe produce with many roads closed by snow and ice. Some canals and rivers have also frozen, including the Danube, disrupting shipping on those inland waterways.

The Italian Farmers Confederation wants the Government to declare a state of emergency, saying tens of thousands of animals have already been lost and as many as two million cows and pigs could die due to lack of food and water.

Spain steps up jobless fight

Spain's Cabinet approves moves to reduce unemployment rates

These include labour law changes giving more flexibility to employers to hire and fire workers as the Government is keen to end a big rise in temporary job contracts. Severance pay when people are laid off is to be reduced

and wage rises delinked from inflation.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy recently acknowledged that the jobless figures will not improve this year. Spain's unemployment rate is expected to continue rising from almost 23 percent last year and, according to economists, will

hover around the 24.5 percent mark this year and next year. Unemployment among young Spaniards is close to 50 percent.

With Spain heading into recession for the second time in three years, job creation is still a long way off and the changes are not expected have an immediate effect.

Elizabeth Taylor art sale fetches £14m

Three paintings from Elizabeth Taylor's personal art collection sold for £13.7m at an auction in London

The combined total of the Vincent Van Gogh, Edgar Degas and Claude Pissarro artworks fetched more than double the £6.2m estimate at the Christie's sale. Van Gogh's *Vue de l'asile et de la Chapelle de Saint-Remy* (1889), fetched £10.1m, the highest price.

Taylor's father originally bought the piece on her behalf in 1963 for £92,000. It had been hung on the star's living room wall in her California home until her death in March. The other two paintings, a self-portrait by Degas and a large-scale landscape by



Van Gogh's *Vue de de l'asile et de la Chapelle de Saint-Remy*

Pissarro — called *Pommiers a Eragny* — sold for £713,250 and £2.9m respectively.

All three artworks featured in the global tour of highlights from the Collection of Elizabeth Taylor, which was

displayed in both New York and London last autumn. A further sale will offer 35 works from the film star's fine art collection. In December, a sale of her personal items fetched \$150m.

Internet users plan protests against anti-piracy accord

Opposition thinks of controversial measures to combat Internet piracy in Europe

Campaigners who fear increased censorship have almost reached their goal of 2m signatures for a petition calling for ACTA — the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement — to be ditched.

The agreement, negotiated between the EU, the US and several other countries, seeks to combat piracy and counterfeiting in areas ranging from merchandise and medicine to illegal downloading on the Internet. It is the last part that has caused a storm of protest.

Europe's former communist bloc in particular has seen a wave of demonstrations. The Polish and Czech governments have suspended their ratification of the accord because of the opposition. ACTA's detractors say it is too vague and opens the door to abuse by the owners of intellectual property.