

Mayor Performs Greece's First Same-Sex Marriages

By ANTHEE CARASSAVA

ATHENS — Defying governmental wrath, the mayor of a remote Greek island performed the country's first same-sex marriages on Tuesday, wedding two men and two women.

The civil ceremonies, held at sunrise in the nondescript town hall of Tilos, a tiny island in the eastern Aegean Sea, defied statements by a senior Greek prosecutor last week that such unions were illegal.

"It's done, now," the mayor, Anastassios Aliferis, said in a telephone interview. "The unions

have been registered, and the licenses have been issued. It's a historic moment."

With its abundance of glamorous gay bars and summer island resorts like Mykonos, Greece has long drawn thousands of gay tourists annually. But gay men and lesbians in this European Union nation of 11 million people frequently complain of discrimination. Public displays of affection are widely frowned upon. The country's military bars gay men and lesbians from joining its ranks, and in 2003 a private Greek television network, Mega

Channel, was fined \$116,000 by the National Radio and Television Council for showing men kissing in a weekly drama. Greece's powerful Orthodox Church has also denounced homosexuality as a sin and "defect of human nature."

On Tuesday, however, a bubbling just-married Evangelia Vlamis emerged from the Tilos town hall, telling the BBC that the unions would help end discrimination. "We did this to encourage other gay people to take a stand," she said.

About two dozen people attended the no-frills ceremony, held under the watchful eyes of police officers and dumbfounded locals.

"I couldn't believe it," said Sofia Kamma, a resident contacted by phone. "I know they're people too, but couldn't they have gone on doing what they were doing without getting our community involved?"

Greek gay rights groups have noted a loophole in a 1982 law that does not specify that a civil union must involve a man and woman.

But last week, as the gay couples made plans to tie the knot, taking out a wedding notice in a local newspaper, Greece's top prosecutor, Giorgos Sanidas, warned that any same-sex marriage would be "automatically nullified and considered illegal."

He said the decree was found-

ed in the spirit of the Constitution, which defines marriage as matrimony between a man and a woman with the intent of forming a family.

But Mr. Aliferis, a Socialist foe of the ruling conservative government, insisted otherwise. "There is no court in Europe that will side by this arcane reading of the Constitution," he said. "What happens if a couple cannot reproduce and have a family? Is their marriage null and void?"

Gay activists have warned that they may now begin to sue any of the country's municipalities if civil authorities resist requests for similar same-sex unions.

The Netherlands was the first European Union country to offer full civil marriage rights to gay couples, in 2001. Belgium did so in 2003, followed by Spain, despite fierce opposition from the Roman Catholic Church.

Most other European Union countries have varying forms of civil unions.

"It's ludicrous for Greece, the cradle of democracy and human rights, to deny homosexuals equal rights and privileges," Mr. Aliferis said. "Officials should take the time and reassess their views."

Gay activists have vowed to seek recourse with the European Court of Justice if authorities in Greece continue to challenge same-sex marriages.

Names of the Dead

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MIXON, Justin R., 22, Cpl., Army; Bogalusa La.; Second Stryker Cavalry Regiment.

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