

Basque separatist ETA steps up violence

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The last weeks have seen a significant escalation of violence by Basque separatists against the federal government of Prime Minister José María Aznar and the Spanish establishment. To demonstrate the organisation's ability to strike across the country, ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) attacks have not only been made in Madrid and Andalusia, but in the Basque region as well.

ETA has admitted planting the bomb that exploded on Tuesday night in the Basque capital Vitoria. Although the explosion created extensive damage, nobody was injured in the blast. Another bomb was found later, attached to the car of a socialist deputy in the southern city of Malaga, but it did not explode.

On July 16, a car bomb exploded outside a Civil Guards (police) barracks in Ágreda (Soria), some 120 miles northeast of Madrid, causing extensive damage to the barracks and adjacent buildings.

On July 15, a town councillor from Aznar's ruling Popular Party (PP) was shot dead outside his home in the southern coastal city of Málaga. José María Martín Carpeta was the ETA's sixth victim since it ended its cease-fire in December 1999, and the second PP member to have been targeted. For much of its 30-year activity ETA had selected only military targets and was held responsible for some 800 deaths. After 1995, however, it began targeting PP councillors. Carpeta was the ninth PP councillor to have been killed. Most of these killings were in the Basque region, although killings have also taken place in Seville.

On July 12 a car bomb exploded in the Plaza Callao district, in central Madrid. The 20-kilo bomb exploded at 6:30 a.m., injuring nine people and shattering windows on all 10 storeys of the Corte Ingles department store. According to the police, a half-hour warning had been telephoned to the fire department but the bomb exploded 20 minutes later before the area was completely cleared.

This incident followed an earlier explosion outside a Basque newspaper office and the defusing of a device found under a Basque businessman's car the previous week.

ETA's calls for Basque autonomy are aimed at establishing its position as part of a Basque regional bourgeoisie and political power brokers in Spain. ETA originally implemented its 14-month cease-fire in the hope that it would be able to secure greater autonomy for the Basque region through a power-sharing arrangement, similar to that agreed with Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland. But it abandoned the cease-fire when it became clear that Aznar's government was hostile to any such agreement.

The aim of ETA's present terror campaign is to pressure the government into renewing talks. However, the PP has responded to the latest attacks by reiterating that it would not restart negotiations with the group. Interior Minister Jaime Mayor Oreja said, "The government ... wants to reiterate now more than ever the validity of its principles and criteria in its policy against terror." Aznar attended Carpeta's funeral on Sunday and periods of silence were observed at town halls throughout Spain on Monday, including Vitoria, the Basque capital. More than 300,000 people marched in Málaga (a town of just over a half million inhabitants) against the terrorist attacks.

The Basque separatists' campaign has isolated them from many working people in Spain and has strengthened Aznar's right-wing government. The prime minister has made his refusal to negotiate with the group a central part of his propaganda. Following the increase in votes for the PP in the March general election he was able for the first time to establish a government without the support of minority regional parties, such as the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). Subsequently, the government has hardened its stance against the Basque separatists, refusing any

further extension of the Basque region's autonomy.

The PNV—which has sought to maintain some form of unity amongst the Basque nationalists—has come under pressure to sever its ties with ETA's political affiliates, Euskal Herritarrok (Basque Citizens) and Herri Batasuna (Popular Unity). After the latest wave of killings, Juan Jose Ibarretxe, PNV President of the Basque regional government, made his most outspoken attack against ETA, accusing them of “destroying people, families and peaceful coexistence” and calling on them to end their campaign. But PNV President Xabier Arzalluz blamed the Aznar government for ETA's new outbreak of violence. Arzalluz said that the PP had never held to the previous cease-fire, arresting more than 50 ETA members during that time.

There are signs of dissent within the PP from those who favour renewed negotiations. Jose Luis Pedrosa, the brother of PP councillor Jesus Maria Pedrosa who was killed by the ETA in June, warned: “As long as no one sits down to talk, these men will continue killing”.



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