

Spanish government clamps down on Basque separatist ETA

Vicky Short

13 November 2000

The latest bomb exploded by Basque separatists killed three people killed in Madrid on October 30. This brought the number of killings attributed to ETA (Euzkadi Ta Azkatasuna—Basque Fatherland and Liberty) since January this year to 19.

ETA resumed its campaign of violence last January, after a 14-month ceasefire broke down, saying it would kill one person per month if the government did not come back to the negotiating table. Euskal Herriarrok, ETA's political arm, recently stated the organisation was prepared to continue a cycle of violence that could last 8 or 10 years, or the time the organisation considers necessary to initiate another political process.

In the latest attack, a car loaded with 30 kilos of dynamite was exploded at 9.12 as the official car of the 69-year-old Supreme Court Judge for the Military, General José Francisco Querol, passed by. Querol, his bodyguard, 53-year-old Jesús Escudero and his chauffeur, 57-year-old Armando Medina, were killed instantly, their bodies were incinerated beyond recognition. The explosion injured a further 64, one very seriously. Many of these were in a bus travelling alongside the judge's official car. The bus driver, 35-year-old Jesús Sánchez Martínez, sustained possibly critical head injuries. The bomb also damaged 400 houses and shops.

Among those allegedly killed by ETA since January this year are 6 politicians, 3 military officers, 2 civil guards, 1 national policeman, 1 Basque policeman, 2 judges, 1 businessman, 1 journalist, 1 prison officer and 1 civilian. It is the highest toll since 1992, when ETA was blamed for 26 killings.

ETA wants a separate Basque state comprising four northern Spanish provinces and three provinces in south-west France. The officially recognised region of the Basque country, one of Spain's 17 semi-autonomous regions, is made up of Alava, Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa. ETA also considers the region of Navarre to be Basque. In France it claims the provinces of Labourd, Soule and Basse Navarre.

In September 1998, ETA reached a pact with 19 Basque nationalist parties and trade unions, code named *Pacto de Lizarra*. This was aimed at putting pressure on the Spanish government to make further concessions that would pave the way towards an independent Euskal Herria (Land of the

Basque), including the setting up of a Constituent Assembly. The United Left, a coalition of radicals and nationalists, led by Spain's Stalinist Communist Party, brokered the agreement. The signatories included the main moderate nationalist party, Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV), which was at the time part of the Popular Party (PP) minority government in Madrid.

Basing itself on this agreement, ETA decided to declare a unilateral indefinite ceasefire in order to create the conditions for discussion with the right wing PP government of José María Aznar. ETA was seeking the inclusion of its political arm, Herri Batasuna, in a regional Basque government. Over the next 14 months, Aznar demonstrated very little interest in a negotiated agreement and launched several blows against ETA's organisation. Only one meeting took place, an insignificant number of prisoners were transferred to prisons in the Basque area—one of ETA's demands—and arrests of alleged ETA members continued unabated on both sides of the Pyrenees. In December 1999 ETA decided to end its ceasefire and resume a campaign of violence.

Since then, Madrid has intensified its clampdown on ETA. Despite the increase in the number of violent actions attributed to ETA, there is little doubt that the organisation's capacity to operate has been reduced, at least temporarily, by a string of arrests. One of the most spectacular came on the night of September 15, when police in France closed in on a villa in the south-western town of Bidart and arrested Ignacio Gracia Arregui, who is believed to have run much of ETA's campaign since 1992, including an aborted sniper attempt on the life of King Juan Carlos in Mallorca in 1995. The roundup of 15 other suspects in the same area followed Arregui's arrest. Among them is Angel Pikabea Ugalde, said to be responsible for stockpiling arms and explosives in France. Another is José Luis Turrillas Aranzeta, believed to be the head of ETA's larger logistics structure.

A few days later, the autonomous Basque police, the Ertzaintza, found an apartment north of Bilbao that was the base of four bomb carriers who blew themselves up last September. The Ertzaintza said "abundant" documentation was found, plus a workshop for making the limpet bombs that are attached to victims' cars.

In the long term, a bigger blow may have been the September

13 arrests in Spain—on the orders of Spain's best-known judge Baltasar Garzón—of 20 people belonging to the pro-independence group Ekin. Spanish police allege some of its members are top ETA strategists and fund raisers. Eighteen of those arrested have been charged with belonging to an illegal organisation.

The move by the Aznar's government towards a police-military solution to the Basque problem and its utilisation of violence to smash all democratic rights in Spain has produced a radicalisation of many youth. In the Basque country this, added to an unemployment rate of 40 percent in some areas amongst the young, means that ETA has a deep well of recruits. Far from offering any progressive solution to the social and political problems facing young people, however, ETA's perspective of individual terrorism, nationalism and separatism only disarms them in the face of the repression by the Spanish state.

The young recruits are used for lower-level attacks—called *kale borroka* in the Basque language, or street violence—which take place almost daily in the Basque region. These usually involve masked youths hurling fire-bombs and smashing shop windows. Once this apprenticeship ends, they qualify for more brutal acts of violence, such as carrying out bombings. Often these result in the terrorists being killed themselves or ending up in jail (of the four "commandos" blown up by their own bomb in Bilbao, only one was a veteran; the others were in their early 20s).

Meanwhile, the government in Madrid is in the process of toughening Spain's anti terrorism laws. Justice Minister Angel Acebes plans a new law aimed at Basque and Spanish youth in general. Under the projected legislation, minors aged 14 to 18 suspected of terrorist offences could be held in internment centres for up to 10 years. It also wants to increase the maximum 30-year sentence under the present law for adults to life imprisonment. Other proposals would make it a crime to justify terrorism or to humiliate its victims.

Some Western governments such as Portugal, are cheering Aznar and encouraging him in his mission to exterminate ETA. Moreover his campaign against ETA would have been impossible without the collaboration of France.

Within Spain itself, the much-heralded "unity of all the democratic forces," established since the ETA cease-fire ended, is beginning to crack. Many voices are beginning to express concern about the wider social implications of the repressive measures and authoritarian stance being taken by Aznar and the consequences of the proposed legal changes. A demonstration against ETA called in Madrid last week was much smaller than previous ones. Neither ex- Socialist Party (PSOE) Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez, nor its newly elected leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero were present.

The PSOE has been asking the government to revise its strategy towards ETA and advising Aznar "to stop stoking up a situation already heated by the wave of violent attacks". They

are also asking him to let-up on his attacks on the PNV, the PP government's partner in the last legislature. The PP has succeeded in getting the PNV expelled from the Christian Democratic International—an organisation that the Basque nationalists helped to found in 1947.

The PSOE says that it will not support the changes in the law regarding the youth. Fearing a public backlash against Aznar's open disregard for democratic rights, the PSOE warns: "We don't think it is sensible to slit open the penal code or the legislation affecting minors every time ETA strikes ... we need to create a firm and stable framework, as hard as it needs to be against the terrorists, from which the security forces and bodies of the State can operate." They advise the government not to divert public opinion into "false debates" about increases in sentencing when what is necessary is to "give moral, political and budgetary support" to the police. The PSOE will present an amendment to the government's proposals regarding youth aged between 16 and 18, connected with ETA, stating that the maximum sentences should be between 5 and 8 years.

The PSOE fears that it is being too closely identified with the policies of the PP and is now attempting to reach an agreement with the PNV in the Basque regional parliament. This change of tactics says a lot about the social and political situation developing in Spain. In the past few years the PSOE has collaborated with the right wing government in every attack on social conditions and democratic rights. It has marched, hand in hand with the government and the most reactionary forces in the country, from the military, the police and the Catholic Church to the employers and old Franco supporters. It now fears that the social anger in the working class towards the government will engulf the PSOE as well.

See Also:

Basque separatists step up terrorist activities
[25 August 2000]

Pacto de Lizarra: Basque separatist ETA offers unconditional cease-fire
[25 September 1998]



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact