

Spain: Aznar rejects public inquiry into military plane crash

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Popular Party (PP) president José María Aznar is resisting calls for a full public inquiry into May's military plane crash in Turkey that killed 62 Spanish soldiers and 12 Ukrainian flight crew. The dead soldiers' families and sections of the lower-ranking military are demanding that such an inquiry focus on the extent of prior information Aznar and his minister of defence, Federico Trillo-Figueroa, had of soldiers' growing safety concerns and those of other European governments.

The families have denounced the conduct of the PP government. They formed an association on June 29 to find out the cause of the accident, to bring out the responsibilities of the military and politicians for it and to gain proper compensation for the relatives. They accuse the minister of defence of investigating as he goes along and charge that up to July 18 it remains uncertain which company is responsible for insurance claims.

On May 26, a Yakolev-42 aircraft owned by Ukrainian Mediterranean Airlines (UMA) left Kabul, stopping off at Bishkek Kyrgyzstan to pick up more Spanish troops on their way to Zaragoza military air base, Spain. The soldiers, mainly from a regiment of engineers, had completed a four-month tour of duty working with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployed in construction and bomb disposal duties in Afghanistan.

As they flew over Turkey, the pilot made a request to land in the Turkish Black Sea port of Trabzon for refuelling. In dense fog and high wind, the first and second attempts were aborted. During the third attempt, the plane veered off towards mountains and crashed 35 kilometres away, near the town of Macka. It was reported that during the second attempt radio contact had been lost. Eye witnesses reported seeing an explosion in the sky.

Turkish rescuers were unable to approach the plane for 20 minutes because ammunition on board continued to explode. Those first to the crash site described a scene of utter carnage, with soldiers' limbs and personal effects strewn amongst the wreckage. Even before rescue teams had recovered all the flight recorders, Turkish authorities declared the likely cause as pilot error. Trillo, visiting the crash site with a team of investigators and doctors brought to identify the bodies from name tags, wedding rings and dental records, similarly declared that the

cause of the crash looked to be pilot error.

Trillo told Spanish Radio that the YAK-42 was a "good modern plane" and that the "plane does not seem to be the cause of the tragedy, even less its make or origin." He added that it would be "premature and irresponsible" to blame the crash on the plane's condition. His insistence—before any investigation—that the condition of the plane had nothing to do with the crash contrasted with his unfounded allegation of "pilot error." Trillo was already anticipating the growing accusations from the victims' families and the press.

Relatives of the dead soldiers reacted to Trillo's statement with undisguised fury. They began to recount in the press what their sons, husbands and fathers had told them of the condition of the aircraft. A picture quickly emerged of troops raising a series of concerns through official channels of the aircraft's airworthiness.

Spain's centre-right newspaper *El Mundo* reported that Commander Jose Antonio Fernandez complained about the state of the plane to his wife in a telephone conversation minutes before climbing aboard. Field commanders sent regular reports to military headquarters on the deteriorating safety standards of the planes. Spanish troops had complained that cargo had not been secured, that the pilots couldn't speak proper English, which is the internationally agreed language for air traffic control, and that tyres on the plane's landing gear were worn. They also complained of loose panels and loss of oil from the aircraft.

Despite Trillo's insistence that the Ukrainian plane was safe, the crash was the third disaster in six months involving aircraft from the former Soviet Republic. Last December, 44 mainly Ukrainians died when an Antonov AN-140 crashed in Iran. On May 9, 160 people were killed when the cargo door of a plane, operated by the Ukrainian Defence Ministry, burst open over the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Ukrainian aircraft are amongst the cheapest in an aggressively competitive market.

Trillo again tried to shift responsibility by declaring that more than 130 countries use similar planes. Senior NATO officials regard these aircraft as the real "workhorses" for peacekeepers in the region. NATO is preparing to sign a \$1 billion contract up to 2010, until the European Airbus comes on stream. Trillo, threatening NATO with a public scandal, declared that the

contract for the aircraft was secured through a NATO contractor, NAMSA, which passed it on to the British firm Chapman Freeborn.

NATO officials in Spain insisted that it was not up to them to inspect the safety of the aircraft, that it was up to the Ukrainian authorities. The disagreements between the two sides have subsided for fear that it could cause inquiries into the NATO contract. Safety concerns are growing amongst some of the European countries that employed UMA aircraft.

Investigative reporters have found out that Finish Armed Forces cancelled a similar contract in February. Lt Colonel Kimmo Salomaa said that they used this type of plane, but the contract was terminated because of mounting concerns over poor maintenance. Norwegian Armed Forces spokesman Brigadier Finn Hannestad said that they had also stopped using the planes because they didn't meet international safety standards. A Norwegian explosives expert who'd made the journey in September 2002 said, "To travel in that aircraft was more dangerous than deactivating mines."

Not surprisingly, the families have reacted angrily to these revelations. On May 28, the soldiers' bodies arrived from Turkey in coffins. The military ceremony that followed was broadcast live on Spanish television. Flags on government buildings flew at half-mast. An echelon of the highest representatives of the state approached the relatives. At the front were King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia, who kissed each relative twice. It was reported with an embarrassing solemnity that the King was so moved to attend the ceremony that he cancelled two "very important" engagements that week. Behind him were Aznar and Trillo. As the families saw them approach, shouts of "assassins" and "murderers" were directed at Aznar and Trillo. Further shouts of "You went to Turkey in a good plane" referred to Trillo's visit to the crash site in Trabzon. "I have never seen the atmosphere so tense," one officer told the Spanish press, as soldiers blamed the government for hiring the cheapest aircraft.

The PP's attempt to smother the growing outcry over the deaths, the largest single toll since 1975, with patriotic military zeal nearly ended in a major political crisis in full view of the nation. The situation was temporarily diffused when seven jets roared overhead and someone shouted "Long live the King" and "Long live the army." Immediately after the ceremony, relatives' accounts have painted a different picture of these events.

A few days after, *El Mundo* reported that Carlos Rippollés, brother of one of the victims, Commander José Manuel Ripollés, had sent a letter of protest in the name of his family and with the backing of his brother's comrades, to the minister of defence and the Military High Command, accusing them of "incompetence and cowardliness." In it he described how the ceremony on runway tarmac denied the soldiers their rightful honours because the Ministry of Defence (MOD) wanted to speed up the ceremony. Complaining of the continuous changes

in plans to repatriate the bodies, he accused the MOD of stopping the families from mourning together, in order to prevent discussion and "divide and rule." He also protested at the military's warnings to the dead soldiers' comrades not to attend the funeral "as a means of preventing conversations and criticisms of the military." He added that some "suffered the consequences".

Among the most damning indictments made is that the MOD wanted to bury the dead at night so that the hearses would pass unnoticed. Rippollés says that if it hadn't been for the families' objections they would have gone ahead with this.

Curra Ripollés, sister of Commander Manuel Ripollés, has made public an e-mail that her brother sent her in which a few days before boarding the Yak-42 he said, "Just looking at the tyres and the clothes strewn all over the crew cabin you begin to get heart attack." New facts and reports from soldiers to their military commanders are being leaked to the press.

In response to the growing political crisis, according to a report leaked to the CNN by a Spanish Defence Ministry spokesman in June, Trillo has, without explanation, issued a ban on the use of former Soviet bloc transport planes. The decision to suspend the use of former Soviet transporters was taken after a private meeting between Aznar and Trillo.

Opposition parties and the press have greeted the ban as an admission of guilt, although Aznar and Trillo continue to deny such claims. Alfonso Agulló, the brother of 1st Corporal Vicente Agulló, declared, "We can't trust what Trillo says... First he says the aeroplanes are safe, then he suspends the contract with NAMSA. Now he says again the condition of the aeroplane was good." Curra Ripollés added, "He [Trillo] says that the aeroplane is technically perfect and yet one of the black boxes [of the Yak-42] was not working."

Since the crash, every country involved has sought to blame the others. Relatives rightly fear that each government is not interested in how and why the plane crashed but in extracting themselves from any responsibility for the circumstances that brought the plane down. Aznar's ban on the use of transporters from the former Eastern Bloc will last until the results of a secret internal inquiry, which is designed to release information under strict government control.



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