

Spain: Aznar opposes pullout from Iraq

Keith Lee**9 December 2003**

Prime Minister José María Aznar has rejected calls to bring home Spanish troops stationed in Iraq after seven intelligence agents were killed in an ambush near Baghdad on November 29. It is suspected that this occurred after their killers were tipped off.

In a separate attack near Tikrit on the same day, two Japanese diplomats were also killed. The killings come two weeks after another ally in the occupation of Iraq, Italy, had 19 of its people killed in a bomb attack.

In the November 29 attack, eight Spanish intelligence agents were coming back from Baghdad to the Spanish base in Diwaniyah when they were ambushed by gunmen only 18 miles from the capital. Four of the agents were due to return home and were being replaced by another four. They were in Baghdad so that the agents could meet with "information sources."

Despite having made last-minute changes to their journey, leaving earlier than planned and taking a different route, seven of the eight were killed. It is reported that, though wounded, the surviving agent ran to the bush and telephoned the Centro Nacional de Inteligencia (CNI—National Intelligence Centre) in Madrid to report the attack. The killing was the worst so far for Spain, bringing the total dead in Iraq to 10. It happened in a US Army-controlled area, and at first the dead were taken for Americans by the locals.

Television footage broadcast on Spanish CNN showed that it was a ferocious attack. "There was shooting everywhere," said a student, Omar Hussein, who witnessed it. Both Spanish vehicles were hit by rocket-propelled grenades, and each car had been hit by a large number of bullets. The gun battle raged for 20 minutes.

After witnessing the attack, 18-year-old Ali Sarham said, "This will be a lesson for everybody in Iraq. If they are not going to leave our country, we will get rid of them one by one."

An American NBC network camera crew, along with

their security adviser from the British security firm Centurion, described the scene. Jim Macea and his crew came across the shootings when returning from an assignment: "We were on our way back from Hilla when we came across what we thought at first was an accident," said Macea. "I could see two Iraqis pulling a body headfirst out of the vehicle on the road. I could see Iraqis jumping up and down on top of a third vehicle shouting 'Death to America.' Young people surrounding the bodies posed for the cameras holding their feet over them as if to kick them."

While the media has tried to portray the killing as the act of remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime, US and British troops are not the only forces now being targeted by an ever-larger section of the population, hostile to colonial occupation.

The Spanish deaths bring to 100 the number of troops from the Multinational forces killed in November alone. US authorities in Iraq had reported that the number of attacks against their own forces had dropped.

The deaths of so many of its officers has called into question the role of Spanish intelligence in Iraq, as two of Spain's most experienced teams of spies were killed in one swoop. Commandant José Luis Uña, promotion mate of one of the spies, said in Iraq, "They haven't killed just anybody, they have killed the best."

While in Spain the deaths have been met with shock, it has not lessened opposition to Spanish troops forming part of the occupation or to the war itself. According to opinion polls, it has risen to over 85 percent after briefly falling to 70 percent.

Seventy-year-old Gabina Bosco encapsulated this opposition when he said, "I was shocked with the images, as if it were happening to my own brother. But at the same time I felt furious towards those who instigated this war and caused this massacre."

Prime Minister Aznar rejected any change of course,

insisting he would not withdraw the troops, adding, “There is no alternative, withdrawal is the worst possible route.”

The isolation of the government was expressed at the stage-managed funeral of the spies. Only relatives and special guests were invited. It was only shown on Spanish state TV, and no other media outlets were given access. To stifle any criticism of policy in Iraq, the parliamentary debate over the killings was held at the same time as the funeral.

Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, leader of the main opposition Socialist Party (PSOE), declared his solidarity with “Spanish compatriots...our sons and brothers. This is a day of grief and pain for everyone.”

He said Bush, Aznar and British prime minister Tony Blair had made a series of mistakes, which involved attacking Iraq without UN permission and using a false justification for war. But he opposed the call to bring the troops home: “It would be a mistake to pull them out now.” He called for a new UN resolution and suggested that Arab troops should take part in policing the occupation.

Adapting to the growing hostility in the general population to the war, the United Left leader, Gaspar Llamazares, called for “the immediate return home of our soldiers.”

Sections of the conservative media that have largely supported Aznar and the war also expressed their growing concern. *El Mundo*, which is close to Aznar’s Popular Party (PP) government, wrote that the insurgent attacks could no longer be called terrorism but were an expression of the wishes of the Iraqi people. A poll in *El Mundo* also found that two-thirds of the people asked were in favour of the troops coming home.

At a recent football game, one minute’s silence was held for the killed soldiers, which was followed by the crowd chanting “No to war!”



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