

Spain: Prime Minister Aznar may face slander charges

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18 December 2003

Spain's right-wing Popular Party prime minister José Maria Aznar faces charges of slander brought by 16 North Africans detained by anti-terror police in raids across northeastern Spain on January 25. Those detained were accused of being an Al-Qaeda cell planning terrorist attacks in Spain. On March 21, 14 were released by Madrid's High Court judge due to insufficient evidence against them. They remain under investigation and must report each day to court officials in Barcelona and surrounding towns.

The 16 are claiming compensation for the trauma they suffered as a result of being arrested at gunpoint, their false imprisonment, and—after being publicly branded as dangerous terrorists—the difficulties they have in gaining employment. At the time of the arrests, Aznar was under pressure to justify his support for the Bush administration's plans for the colonial subjugation of Iraq. According to the latest opinion polls, 65 percent of the Spanish population believe that Aznar deceived them when he made the case for war. The arrest of the "Spanish cell" was Aznar's attempt to "make people realise" that Spain could face its own 9/11.

George Bush sent his congratulations to Aznar on the arrests. Aznar described the arrests as a major breakthrough in evidence connecting Al-Qaeda with the Baathist regime, and therefore Saddam Hussein with the September 11 bombings. It was claimed that the "Spanish cell" had secret meetings with an alleged Al-Qaeda operative, Abu Musa Al-Zarkawi, who, according to Powell, ran a terrorist network in Iraq under the protection of Saddam Hussein. These associations between individuals and organisations were presented as hard facts, not allegations that had to be proven.

On January 25, at 3.30 a.m., 150 armed police raided 12 addresses in Catalonia. One of those detained described the ferocity of the raids. When his door was blown off, he thought his apartment was on fire and the men rushing in were firemen. According to intelligence sources, the raids were the result of an 18-month operation involving intelligence services across Europe. Substances taken from apartments were described as "bomb-making equipment." Those detained faced charges of collaborating with terrorist organisations, carrying a minimum of six years in jail.

Before they had even faced a judge, let alone a public trial, the detainees were demonised by the world's press. On the day of the arrests, Spain's *El Pais*, a critic of Aznar's support for the Bush administration, described the detainees as an Al-Qaeda terrorist

cell and the substances seized as explosives. *El Pais* ran a lurid article about tests to be run on "400 grammes of an as yet unidentified white powder"—evoking the anthrax scares that hit Britain and the US in order to frighten the Spanish population.

The British *Guardian* declared without substantiation that "Some of those detained were reported yesterday to have been in contact with the people who carried out the Bali bomb attack in October."

On January 24, the government's Russian Information Center wrote, "The members of the Al-Qaeda terrorist net, who were arrested in Spain on Friday, proved to have provided Chechen militants with communications means and other kinds of equipment, Spanish Interior Minister Angel Acebes has said at a news conference."

Police in press releases described the detainees as a cell that "provided information and support to other terror groups, had explosives, used chemical products, and had connections with terror cells in Britain and France." They announced scientific tests would be carried out in Spain and the US on the materials found in the apartments. Telephones and household electronic equipment with "electronics manuals" were presented to press photographers as evidence of bomb-making equipment. A pistol appeared in the displays presented to Spanish newspapers. One of those detained said that when the gun appeared, even Muslims conceded that they must be terrorists.

French judge Jean-Louis Brugiere requested Spanish help in a case against four alleged Al-Qaeda suspects detained in Paris. His request for the arrests was based on a statement by one of those detained that while on route to France he had stayed in an apartment occupied by one of those arrested in the raids in Spain. Brugiere has become known as Europe's most notorious hunter of Al-Qaeda suspects. As an initial indication of the fragility of the evidence against the detainees, on February 19 Brugiere—who had requested the arrests—declared he would not seek their extradition because they had not committed any criminal offences on French territory.

Immediately after the arrests in Catalonia, Aznar held a press conference and made extraordinary claims concerning the 16. He praised the police for "breaking up an important network of terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda. They were preparing to carry out attacks with explosives and chemicals."

He added that the arrests highlighted "the danger of terrorist groups getting hold of weapons of mass destruction... We are not

talking about hypothetical or remote dangers... [W]e must fight against it if we do not want them to cause major problems to our liberty, security and tranquility.”

In a speech to parliamentary deputies, Aznar declared that those arrested worked closely with an alleged Al-Qaeda member, who it is claimed had spent some time in Iraq. “His collaborators have been picked up recently in Spain and Britain. The problem affects us closely,” Aznar said.

The timing of the arrests served two purposes: to provide propaganda material for Colin Powell’s February 5 speech at the United Nations Security Council demanding UN support for the invasion of Iraq, and to try to undermine popular hostility to war preparations in the Spanish and European population.

At the Security Council, Powell praised the Spanish authorities for their excellent work in capturing this dangerous cell and providing further evidence of a “sinister nexus” between Baghdad and Osama bin Laden. The “Spanish cell” appeared in a box as part of a diagram illustrating the connections between Al-Qaeda and the Baathist regime through alleged Al-Qaeda operative Al-Zarqawi.

Within days of this presentation, evidence provided by US and European intelligence services would shatter the entire edifice of Powell’s allegations. At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted that the secretary of state’s arguments met none of the basic rules of evidence or standards of jurisprudence normally required to convict and punish an individual defendant, let alone to bomb and kill tens of thousands and lay waste to a nation of 23 million people.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote on February 14 that Powell’s entire case rested upon the activities of a Jordanian-born Palestinian, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, 36, who fought in Afghanistan as part of the CIA-sponsored Mujaheddin against the Soviet-backed regime in the 1980s. According to Powell, Zarqawi was now linked to Al-Qaeda, and, after fleeing from Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban regime, had established a terrorist network in Iraq.

Both German and British intelligence sources dismissed the connection Powell made between Zarqawi and Baghdad. The article explained that a further refutation had been made by French intelligence. It said that in a diagram allegedly illustrating the extent of the Zarqawi network in Europe, Powell included the photos of two Islamic militants—Merouane Benhamed and Menad Benchellali—who were arrested last year in Paris. However, French intelligence sources told Agence France Presse that the men they had detained had never been linked to Zarqawi and were considered to be part of a Chechen terrorist network: “At no point did the DST [French anti-terrorist and counter-espionage services], which organised these arrests, establish the slightest link between these two men and al Zarqawi.”

Thus, the foundations of Aznar’s accusation of a direct link between the “Spanish cell,” Al-Qaeda, and Baghdad was undermined within days. Consequently, the case against the 16 North Africans had, up until September, been shelved. A Spanish judge described the evidence presented to him by the prosecution as “very weak.” According to a Reuters report on September 30, four of those arrested were freed “unconditionally after each was

questioned for five minutes by Judge Guillermo Ruiz de Polanco in Madrid’s National Court.”

This came in the same month that the head of Spain’s National Intelligence Centre (Spanish secret services), Jorge Dozcaller, issued a report declaring that after extensive investigations it had found no link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda.

The substances taken from the accused apartments were admitted in court to be ordinary stores of honey, olive oil, washing powder and household detergent. The gun displayed by the police on Spanish television was revealed to be a child’s toy that police had added without presenting it to the court as evidence. In Algeria, where a “dirty war” is being fought by the government against Islamic political parties, none of those arrested in Spain appeared on police wanted lists.

According to the *Guardian* on September 13, one of those arrested in Spain, a Mr. Boudjelthi, acknowledged that one of those arrested by French security services had stayed at his apartment after arriving from Algeria. Boudjelthi said he had no idea of his political affiliations and that it was common for new arrivals from Algeria to stay at his address. Even the local Red Cross asked him regularly to provide shelter. Before the January arrests, 20 mainly Algerians had been seized by Spanish police in similar raids. According to press reports, not a single instance had even the cursory evidence required by law to bring their cases to trial. Most are languishing in jail or have been released on bail.

In a desperate act of revenge, assisted by the US secret services, the Spanish government is threatening to reopen the case. The Spanish national court announced towards the end of September that the case may be reopened based on new studies of the seized substances by a US laboratory. Police had initially asked for a week’s grace to allow laboratories to conduct further tests, but had declared the substances harmless. In September the right-wing newspaper *El Mundo*’s web site described a report from a US laboratory that “affirms the substances found [the honey, olive oil etc.], when combined with other elements, could produce deflagration [a relatively slow explosion].”

Despite an 18-month investigation by a number of European intelligence services, there remains no evidence whatsoever against the 16 of having engaged in terrorist plots.



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