

Spanish government rejects Iraqi WMD inquiry

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Spain's right-wing Popular Party (Partido Popular—PP) government has rejected calls for an inquiry into why it said Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Along with British prime minister Tony Blair, Spain's prime minister José Maria Aznar was one of the staunchest supporters of the US-led invasion, despite mass popular opposition.

At the time of the international anti-war protests on February 15, 2003, some 91 percent of Spaniards opposed the war. Aznar, who had ruled out any parliamentary debate, appeared several times on television stating categorically that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. In February, he told Antena 3, "The Iraqi regime has weapons of mass destruction, it has links to terrorist groups." He subsequently told the state television company TVE that he was "absolutely convinced" that the weapons existed.

The resignation of Iraq Survey Group head Dr. David Kay, and his acknowledgement that not only had such weapons not been found but that it was unlikely they had ever existed, has forced US president George W. Bush and Blair to convene limited inquiries based on the claim that they had acted in good faith and that what was involved is purely an intelligence failure. Neither inquiry will expose the truth—that the US and Britain deliberately lied about Iraq's capabilities to justify an illegal pre-emptive attack on the country. Both inquiries are intended to whitewash this fact.

But in the run-up to the March 14 general election, Aznar (who is standing down after the vote) is reluctant to risk even such a limited investigation. Rejecting any inquiry, Foreign Minister Ana Palacio said that the government's position had been based on "data and a consensus that existed at the United Nations.... [T]here was a consensus to disarm, which was written into several UN resolutions."

In reality, none of the UN resolutions sanctioned military action. This was precisely the sticking point for Bush, Blair and Aznar, requiring them to construct a pretext for their intentions. Palacio, knowing that the government will face great hostility in the election, continues to lie. "I don't have to show that [weapons of mass destruction] exist," she said. "They existed and Saddam Hussein's regime is asked to say where they are."

The liberal daily *El Pais* last week quoted an internal government document justifying support for the war on the basis of reports from UN weapons inspectors, UN resolutions and Spain's national interests. The document, the existence of which the government has refused to confirm or deny, was drawn up as a guideline for candidates in the election who are likely to face opposition on the question of the war.

This was confirmed by last weekend's demonstrations against the continued occupation of Iraq. Tens of thousands marched in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and other cities, demanding the withdrawal of Spanish troops. At the same time, former UN weapons inspector Hans Blix gave an interview on Spain's SER radio that could be highly embarrassing for the government. Answering questions about Madrid's reliance on UN statements to justify the war, Blix stated categorically that his report had not said there were any weapons.

"[The report] noted that many Iraqi statements were erroneous," he explained. "That left open the possibility that there could have been some weapons, but nowhere did our report state that there were weapons."

The opposition Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol (PSOE—the Socialist Party) has called for the declassification of intelligence documents, and

spokesman Jesus Caldera demanded that the constitutional court investigate this “illegal war.” A parliamentary committee has already refused to call Aznar to answer questions.

Caldera, referring to the Bush and Blair inquiries, said, “The rights that US and British citizens enjoy are refused to the Spanish people.”

Jose Luis Zapatero, leader and prime ministerial candidate of the PSOE, has demanded that the PP account for “the lies” surrounding the decision to go to war.

According to *El Pais*, the government’s internal document argues that Spain has no responsibility to account for the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, as the Spanish government relied solely on UN suspicions. The document is quoted as saying, “The government never used as an argument any statement from any report of any secret service.”

Aznar’s office has made the UN’s authority central to his justification for supporting the war (“The resolutions of the United Nations, the national interest of Spain, and willingness to contribute to a better, more stable and safer world based on the inspectors’ reports”). And the parliamentary opposition is also using the UN as a vehicle for embracing militarism. Zapatero has raised the possibility that an incoming PSOE government could withdraw the 1,300 Spanish troops currently stationed in Iraq when their mission officially ends on June 30. He added, however, that the PSOE would agree to keeping troops in Iraq under a UN mandate.

The reasons for Aznar’s support for military action were to be found in his address to the US Congress earlier this month, when he reaffirmed his commitment to the “war against terror.” While the US government used notional links between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime as a pretext for war, Aznar sought to exploit it for domestic assistance in dealing with Basque separatists. Without mentioning the growing recognition that no evidence exists for any such weapons, Aznar told Congress that Spain could not “stand by and do nothing” if there was any risk of their existence, or that they could be used by terrorists.

Aznar sees a closer alliance with the US, an “Atlantic relationship” that “strengthens Europeans and Americans alike,” as the essential basis for promoting Spain’s own imperialist interests. This is what

prompted the somewhat bizarre justification for supporting Bush, that Aznar could not simply abandon 350 million Spanish-speakers, 40 million of them in the US (the population of Spain itself is around 43 million). He has won praise for having “led the resistance to French and German manoeuvres” to create a European Union bloc against the US, as the *New York Post* put it.

Aznar has sought to play a key role in liaising and strengthening trade links with Latin America. One of the tasks assigned to Spanish troops in Iraq has been to lead and train the Plus Ultra Brigade, composed of troops from Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic.

However, there have been few concrete returns. The suggestion that the US Sixth Fleet move from Italy to Spain, which would boost the economy in the south of the country, remains tentative. Contracts for rebuilding Iraq have not come Spain’s way, as hoped. Unemployment remains the highest within the EU, and growth has been based on low wages. In a recent poll, 56 percent of Spaniards admitted to having difficulties paying their monthly bills.



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