

Spain: New prime minister says troops to be withdrawn from Iraq

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In a televised statement April 18, within hours of his new government being sworn into office, Socialist Party (PSOE) Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero ordered Spanish troops to be pulled out of Iraq “as soon as possible.”

Zapatero said he had ordered his defence minister to “do what is necessary for the Spanish troops stationed in Iraq to return home in the shortest time possible.”

As soon as Zapatero made his announcement hundreds of people gathered in the Puerta del Sol square, the scene of previous mass antiwar rallies, carrying homemade placards declaring, “Peace, justice, liberate Iraq from the liberators,” “Illegal war, deaths, ruins, chaos, plundering: Time for peace with Iraq.” People chanted, “No to NATO, bases out,” “Troops back” and “PP [Popular Party], we have won. We have pulled the troops out of Iraq.”

The PSOE was swept to power last month on a wave of antiwar sentiment and anger over the lies of Popular Party Prime Minister José María Aznar in the aftermath of the terrorist bombings in Madrid, which killed nearly 200 and injured a further 1,500 people.

Aznar had attempted to blame the Basque separatist ETA for the bombings, both to justify his government’s own “war on terrorism” and to prevent the election becoming a referendum on the Iraq war that was opposed by the majority of the Spanish population. As news emerged that Islamic militants had claimed responsibility for the bombings in retaliation for Spain’s role in Iraq, spontaneous demonstrations took place outside the PP’s headquarters demanding the truth. Within 48 hours, the PP was out of government as the Spanish people turned out in force at the polling stations to show their disgust and anger with Aznar.

Having won some 42 percent of the vote, Zapatero declared immediately that his government would withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq following the June 30

US-imposed deadline for the handover to an interim Iraqi administration, if the United Nations was not given a greater role.

However, in his televised statement on Sunday Zapatero made clear that his appeal to the US and other coalition forces had fallen on deaf ears.

“With the information we have, and which we have gathered over the past few weeks, it is not foreseeable that the UN will adopt a resolution that satisfies Spain’s terms,” Zapatero said. “Public statements by the principal actors involved in the conflict, as well as exchanges made by the Defence Ministry at my request during the last month, don’t augur a substantial variation in the political and military situation in Iraq in the timeframes or in the way that’s demanded by the Spanish people.”

Although President George W. Bush presents the June 30 deadline as the commencement of democratic self-rule by the Iraqi people, the interim government is nothing more than collection of US stooges selected to do Washington’s bidding. This is not changed one iota by the decision to involve the UN in helping establishing the new puppet regime. The UN’s function is to serve as a smokescreen for US imperialism’s takeover of oil-rich Iraq.

This is unfolding against the backdrop of a nationwide uprising against the imperialist occupation. Hundreds of Iraqi men, women and children have been killed as the US has sought to drown the resistance movement in blood, encircling the cities of Fallujah and Najaf.

The situation in Najaf is of particular concern for the Spanish government as this is where most of its 1,300 troops are stationed. For several weeks now, US troops have encircled the southern Shiite city where cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and thousands of his supporters have fortified themselves near the Iman Ali Shrine, the holiest site of Shia Islam.

With every indication that the US is preparing another

brutal onslaught against Najaf, Zapatero faced Spain's troops being pulled ever deeper into the Iraqi quagmire and the further inflaming of popular opposition at home.

Noting that most Spaniards had opposed the decision by his predecessor, Jose Maria Aznar, to support the war, Zapatero said in his address that he would keep his pledge to withdraw troops.

"Driven by the deepest democratic convictions, the government does not want to, cannot and will not act against or behind the backs of the will of the Spanish people," he added.

However, the PSOE government has made clear it will work to support the US-led occupation by other means. Zapatero said he will support efforts by the UN or European Union to prepare Iraq for the June 30 deadline. The government has also indicated that it will double its military commitment in Afghanistan in return for its withdrawal from Iraq.

Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos is also to travel to Washington for meetings with Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice to offer non-military cooperation in Iraq.

A further consideration expressed by government officials was that they wanted the troops withdrawn before the European elections, which take place June 13. One opinion poll recorded overwhelming popular backing for Zapatero's announcement.

Zapatero's decision was supported by all the parties represented in Congress except the Popular Party. Aznar said pulling Spain's troops out of Iraq would hand terrorists a victory. "It would be a message of having managed to achieve their objectives," Aznar said in an interview on *Fox News Sunday*. "The only message that terrorists need to get is that they're going to be beaten," he added.

The Spanish press is generally supportive of the decision to withdraw. *El Pais* described the situation in Iraq as having been "Lebanonised," whilst the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* complained that US and Israeli actions were ensuring that the Middle East was completely destabilised.

Zapatero's decision is also regarded as a necessary correction of Aznar's close relationship with Washington at the expense of Spain's relations in Europe. Britain's *Financial Times* opined that Aznar's support for the US attack on Iraq had driven "a wedge between [European] member states" and "turned his country into a self-important but largely irrelevant transatlantic broker." "Fixing Spain's relations with the EU [European Union]

should be Mr. Zapatero's highest priority," it continued.

For its part, the Bush administration attempted to play down the significance of Zapatero's announcement. There was no open repetition of the type of hysterical and slanderous denunciations of the Spanish people by the US press, accusing them of being "cowards" and "appeasing terrorists" for kicking Aznar out of office.

Given the worsening situation in Iraq and ongoing talks with the UN, the US administration clearly consider it inopportune to use such language at this time. Instead, US spokesman Ken Lisaius said that "each country will have to make its own choices in fighting the war against terror and in securing freedom for the Iraqi people." The US would "continue our close cooperation with our NATO ally Spain in fighting the war against terror," he added.

Similarly, the British government of Prime Minister Tony Blair said that whilst it regretted the Spanish withdrawal, "we respect the Spanish government's decision."

Nonetheless the decision is a blow to the Bush administration, which had considered Spain a key ally. Republican Senator John Warner said the decision was "troublesome." "The military situation can accept this, but it will put pressure on the other coalition nations that have joined in this, I'm sure," he told reporters.

Following the announcement, *Al Jazeera* television reported that al-Sadr had called on his supporters to cease any attacks against the Spanish troops deployed in Diwaniya and Najaf. A statement delivered to the media by al-Sadr's spokesman, Qais al Jazaali, said, "We call for the guarantee of security for the Spanish troops until their exit as long as these forces don't commit aggressions against the Iraqi people. We call on the rest of the countries that have sent troops to the core of the coalition in Iraq to follow the example of Spain and withdraw their forces in order to protect the lives of their soldiers."

A decision by the governments of Honduras, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, whose troops operate in liaison with the Spanish soldiers, is expected soon.



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