

Spain attempts to appease the US on Iraq

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As soon as new Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero announced that he would withdraw troops from Iraq as soon as possible, he telephoned President George W. Bush to inform him of his decision. He then instructed his foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, to speak to Secretary of State Colin Powell and arrange a visit to Washington to discuss the move with him.

Moratinos held a meeting with Powell on April 21, during which he emphasised Spain's commitment to continue sending troops wherever necessary in the fight against terrorism, as long as it is under the cover of the United Nations.

A day earlier Bush was reported to have phoned Zapatero to express his anger at the "abrupt Spanish action" that gave "false comfort to terrorists."

Moratinos was at pains to stress that he had not made any promises to Powell. But he avoided answering questions regarding the possibility of Spanish troops returning to Iraq should the UN assume control or whether they could be sent to Afghanistan, thus relieving US troops there for Iraq.

However, the foreign minister promised that Spain would cooperate fully in achieving a new resolution on Iraq, which is being negotiated at present in the UN. He also reiterated Spain's commitment to continue its contribution to the stabilisation of Iraq by means other than military. This is believed to include the possible training of Iraqi policemen and soldiers.

Despite the conciliatory advances of the new Spanish government, the US administration is visibly angry at its decision to withdraw troops and concerned at a knock-on effect on the coalition forces in Iraq.

Moratinos was openly snubbed. Powell did not accompany Moratinos at the press conference following their meeting as is customary and no functionary from the State Department was available to give their version of what had been discussed. Of his brief discussion

with Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, there was not even a photograph.

Moratinos nevertheless continued to use placatory language. Powell and he had agreed, he said, that the important thing was "to look at the future" and continue to cultivate together "a long tradition of friendship and cooperation."

"The United States wants to reinforce its relation with Spain," he added. "The return (of the troops) is a question of the past, we have to look at the objectives that both countries share."

Among these, he declared, was primarily "the priority of both governments towards the fight against terrorism." However, at the press conference Moratinos said that Powell had expressed his "fear" of a domino effect of the Madrid decision to withdraw the troops before June 30.

Two of the three countries that operate in southern Iraq under the Spanish Plus Ultra brigade, Honduras and the Dominican Republic, have already stated that they will follow Spain's example and withdraw their own troops. It seems probable that Nicaragua, which contributes medical teams under Spanish control, will also withdraw from Iraq. This leaves only the 374 soldiers in the conflict ridden Najaf area that come from El Salvador, but even here there are big divisions both in society and the political establishment on the subject.

The Polish government, which leads the so-called Multinational Division, is also coming under enormous pressure to withdraw its troops on the eve of entering the European Union. Echoing the mood in the country, Prime Minister Leszek Miller, who will step down after Poland's EU entry on May 1, declared: "We can't close our eyes to [Spain's] decision to withdraw its troops, but we can't act in an adventurous way ... our decision must be well thought through, and above all conditioned by the development of events" in the area.

“I can’t say when we will leave [Iraq], but I am sure that the new prime minister will say something more precise,” Miller added.

Poland has 2,500 soldiers in Iraq. One possibility aired to the *Irish Times* by Tadeusz Iwinski, who is in charge of international affairs in Miller’s office, is that this number could be drastically reduced. He emphasised that Zapatero’s decision influences Poland’s plans and that the Polish forces “will probably be reduced in a substantial form.”

Other countries are considering their own position. Thailand has warned that it would withdraw its 451 military doctors and engineers if they come under attack. In Italy an online poll found that 60 percent wanted an immediate withdrawal of troops and 27 percent favoured waiting until June 30, the official deadline for transferring power to the US puppet Iraqi regime.

What most worries the Bush administration about the withdrawal of the Spanish troops is its impact on its own population, who are seeing their government become ever more isolated as opposition to the occupation deepens.

Another issue discussed at the meeting between Moratinos and Powell was the situation in the Middle East. Here there appeared to be more agreement between the two men. Moratinos was Spain’s ambassador to Israel under the previous Socialist Party government and for many years was the European Union envoy in the Middle East. Moratinos endorsed the US government’s backing of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s decision to permanently seize over half of the West Bank, stating, “The new dynamics announced by Sharon represent an opportunity.”

He qualified his support with a few weasel words, explaining, “Of course Europe and Spain especially are concerned by the borders (set by Sharon’s land grab). For us, Israel’s frontiers must be those previous to 1967, but we are not in the final phase of the negotiations and, for the time being, what is positive is that the Israelis are going to end the occupation of the good part of the Gaza territory, even if they do it unilaterally.”

Moratinos had previously warned in an interview following the March 11 terror bombings in Madrid that there could be no progress against Al Qaeda and terrorist Islamic cells until the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict is resolved.

He was also deliberately equivocal regarding the possibility of the Spanish troops being redirected to Afghanistan in order to “compensate” the US government for the withdrawal from Iraq. But *El Pais* reports that the desire of the US government to reduce its military presence in Afghanistan and free its troops by transferring the maintenance of a military presence to the European Union is widely known. And it is also well known that Spain is willing to increase its military involvement both in the Balkans and Afghanistan.



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