Spain pulls out Iraq troops ahead of schedule

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April 28 saw the last 260 of Spain's 1,300 combat soldiers finally leave Iraq nearly two weeks ahead of schedule. Prime Minister Jose Zapatero announced the pull-out on April 18, but it was thought this would not take place before May 27.

Another 1,000 will remain behind in a non-combat role to dismantle military equipment. Defence Minister Jose Bono told relatives at Botoa that "the Brigade PlusUltra 11 was dissolved." He said that by May 27 all troops will be gone from Iraq. Honduras and the Dominican Republic have also pledged to pull their troops out.

In the last two weeks, Spanish soldiers have come under increasing attack from Iraqi resistance forces. Spanish troops killed six Iraqis after being ambushed twice near the town of Diwanyia.

The Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government has promised not to send troops back to Iraq even if the United Nations sends a multinational force to the country after the so-called handover of sovereignty on June 30.

It has refused to rule out sending more troops to Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Morantinos said, "Nothing had been decided. In life you can never say never."

Sending more troops to Afghanistan would be an attempt to appease the US government, which has expressed anger at Spain's "abrupt action" in withdrawing troops from Iraq.

The Spanish government's decision to pull the troops was dictated by mass antiwar sentiment that led to the downfall of the right-wing government under José María Aznar. It is also favourably treated by much of the media, who regard it as essential in redefining Spain's foreign policy. *EL Pais* said that Zapatero needed to go beyond "good intentions" and outline a strategy for postwar Iraq. The government still has to define what strategy it supports.... Iraq is a problem that affects all. It is essential to rebuild the international consensus."

La Vanguardia continued in similar vein. It said that Spain needed a foreign policy based on "multilateralism, the defence of international law and respect for the United Nations."

Much of the liberal press that has supported Zapatero's government have been increasingly worried about Spain's isolation from Europe under Aznar's alliance with the US and Britain.

It is significant that Zapatero's first visits in Europe were to Paris and Berlin. The British *Guardian* newspaper claimed that Bono was seen on a television camera before the March elections describing Prime Minister Tony Blair as a "complete dickhead" and an "imbecile."

Zapatero was welcomed enthusiastically by French President Jacques Chirac, after he promised that "Spain will have an attitude of cooperative and shared work with Berlin and Paris."

Chirac returned the compliment by saying, "There is in Berlin, just as in Paris, a strong will to go forward hand-in-hand with Spain on the European route, in the framework of a sincere and loyal cooperation, which requires the interest of each to be taken into consideration but in a spirit of working together and dialogue, rather than in a spirit of confrontation from which nothing good ever emerges."

Zapatero has now pledged to remove Spanish opposition to the new European constitution by reversing Aznar's demands to maintain his nation's preferential voting rights that France and Germany want changed in order to reflect their greater population and economic and political might. By doing so, Zapatero said he hoped this would enable the new constitution to be ready by June 1.

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