

Spain: Socialist Party government to send troops to Afghanistan and Haiti

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24 July 2004

The Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) government has committed more troops to Afghanistan, as well as a contingent of civil guards and police experts to Haiti. The measure was approved in the Spanish Congress on July 6.

At present Spain has 137 soldiers in Afghanistan as part of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF). This figure is going to be increased to 540 in August. In addition, the government will deploy a further 400 to 500-strong battalion for a provisional period of three months, to help with the election process due to start in September. Defence Minister Jose Bono said that Madrid planned to send an infantry battalion, a field hospital, four helicopters and two Hercules C-130 transport airplanes to Afghanistan.

Spain backed France's opposition to the use of the recently created NATO Response Force (NRF) in Afghanistan, as had been requested by Britain and the United States. The NRF was set up last year with a heavy French contingent, but is not due to become fully operational until October 2006. The refusal by the French to use this force in Afghanistan has exacerbated tensions between Europe and the US. French President Jacques Chirac said that the NRF should only be used when there is a serious security crisis, not for Afghan-style missions. "The NRF is not designed for this. It shouldn't be used just for any old matter," he added.

In addition, Spain will send 28 experts from the Civil Guard and National Police Corps to Haiti in October that will be under the command of the United Nations. According to government officials, they will be utilised for the training of a new Haitian police force. Initially the numbers were going to be around 110, but the director of the Spanish Civil Guard, Carlos Gomez Arruche, said that the demand was for very experienced officials who could speak French. Further forces are

planned to be sent in 2005 for coastguard activities.

This is the first time in its history that the Spanish Congress has taken such a decision to send troops to a foreign country. Only a couple of small nationalist parties and the Left-Greens tendency voted in opposition. Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero justified the despatch of additional troops to Afghanistan and Haiti because these were "multilateral initiatives backed by the international community," i.e., the United Nations. He added in his statement to Congress that up until now Spanish military presence abroad had depended on the decisions of the successive governments, but that the present executive wanted to establish "different procedures" and consult the Congress. To this effect, the head of the government has announced a reform of the Law of Defence, so that any future deployment of troops will have to be submitted to a discussion in parliament.

Before his election as prime minister in the general election of March 14, Zapatero had chastised the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government for sending troops to Iraq without allowing any discussion of its decision in parliament. The ousted PP prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, was accused of provoking the March 11 terror attack in Madrid that cost more than 190 lives and hundreds of wounded by his backing for the war against Iraq.

The clear implication of the PSOE's call for a parliamentary debate was that it would be used as a means of opposing the decision to send troops. This apparent anti-militarist stance won the general election for the PSOE, when the PP government was kicked out as a result of the deep antiwar sentiment felt by the Spanish people.

Zapatero was forced to withdraw the Spanish troops from Iraq. But he is now establishing a legalistic cover

for sending troops to Afghanistan and Haiti instead. While doing so he cynically declared, “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.”

Ministers have been at pains to deny that increasing the number of Spanish troops in Afghanistan to over 1,000—approximately the same number as was withdrawn from Iraq—is a form of compensation to the United States. But this is the conclusion that many have drawn. Doubling the number of troops in Afghanistan by Zapatero is also seen as a fulfilment by the PSOE government of the promise made by Aznar before he left office.

The Bush administration reacted with venal hostility to the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, accusing the government of yielding to the terrorists. Questions were raised at the time about secret discussions between the two governments on the possibility of Spain sending troops to Afghanistan, in order to allow the US to release some of its own soldiers present there to be deployed to Iraq. The Spanish government had indeed indicated at the time that it would double its military commitment in Afghanistan in exchange for its withdrawal from Iraq.

Attempts to placate Washington are not all that is involved, however. Spain is anxious that it is not left behind in the imperialist scramble for positions in the oil-rich and strategic zones of the world.

Covering their backs against accusations of duplicity against sending troops to Afghanistan and Haiti when the government withdrew troops from Iraq, Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos told the parliamentary committee it was “impossible to ignore the threat posed by Al Qaeda” and said there was “no doubt as to the legitimacy of international intervention in Afghanistan.” A spokesman for Zapatero, Javier Valenzuela, added that the invasion of Iraq had not been approved by the United Nations Security Council, while the actions in Afghanistan and Haiti were approved by the United Nations.

Spain took another step towards a more prominent role in foreign affairs this month, when a new NATO command centre was opened in Madrid. The new centre houses the command for NATO ground forces in southern Europe, replacing a centre whose geographic responsibilities were limited mainly to southwestern

Europe.



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