

The Madrid bombing trial: what has been revealed so far

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On the third anniversary of the Madrid train bombings that killed 191 people, the trial of those accused of planning and perpetrating the atrocity has become a focus for bitter political divisions within Spain.

Immediately the bombs exploded, the then governing right-wing Popular Party (PP) blamed the Basque separatists of ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom). When it became clear that intelligence services were pursuing links to Al Qaeda, a wave of popular hostility swept the country.

The vast majority of the Spanish people had opposed participation in the war in Iraq, and saw the bombings as confirmation that the foreign policy of José Maria Aznar had made Spain a target. The PP's lies about ETA involvement focused this anger. A massive backlash swept Aznar from office. The general election three days after the bombings returned the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) to power under Jose Zapatero. The PP accused the PSOE of having mounted a coup to steal the election.

Anger against the PP continues. Three years after the attacks, one woman remains in a coma. Hospitals are still treating 110 people for their injuries, and another 68 are receiving psychological help to cope with the trauma. At the unveiling of a monument to the victims, Pilar Manjon, president of one of the victims' associations, attacked the former government for its willingness to exploit the bombings to justify its policies. "To the friends of the former prime minister," she said, "to the friends of the former interior minister, to the friends of Bush, to those who get mad when they lose an election, to those who bless bombings... To all of them, in my name, my most scornful contempt."

After three years of investigation, the trial of 29 defendants finally opened last month. The prosecution is demanding sentences of 38,656 years for the three men suspected of having masterminded the attacks. Those accused of providing material assistance to the bombers face similar sentences. They are charged with 191 murders and more than 1,800 attempted murders.

The 20 Arabs and nine Spaniards on trial are accused of links to Islamic terrorist groups and face charges including murder, stealing dynamite and forging documents.

Giving evidence anonymously last week, the head of the police investigation said that Spain was chosen as a target because it was the "weakest link" of the nations supporting the war in Iraq. According to another police source, a suspect who blew himself up in a flat in the Madrid suburb of Leganés reportedly told his

brother that "200 people die each day in Palestine and Iraq and nobody cares about them."

The head of the police investigation also maintained that there was never "any connection" between the Madrid bombings and any other terrorist organisation. The PP nevertheless continues to insist that ETA was involved in the Atocha bombings, but is reduced to asserting that Basque terrorists only provided the dynamite. Defendants at trial are accused of providing explosives stolen from mines in Asturias, in northern Spain.

One police informant, identified only as "Cartagena," told the court that an Islamic extremist linked to the bombings had been offered ETA's assistance while in prison. But this remains unsupported by any evidence. Prior to the opening of proceedings, there seemed to be some support for the PP's position in a newspaper interview given by the main Spanish suspect, José Emilio Suarez Trashorras. He is accused of supplying explosives to the bombers and faces an additional murder charge, for the death of a police officer in the explosion at Leganés.

In an interview with the pro-PP daily *El Mundo*, Trashorras claimed that one of the main suspects had known the ETA members who were arrested with 500kg of explosives two weeks before the Madrid bombings. However, Trashorras was recorded in prison telling his parents that he would tell *El Mundo* anything as long as they kept paying him: "I'll tell them about the Civil War if they like."

The government has agreed to declassify a secret service report of an interview with Trashorras made while the PP was still in power, in which he does not mention ETA in connection with the attacks. He has said publicly that he has no links with ETA, describing the story as "rumours people have spread for their own ends."

Three bombs remained unexploded after March 11. Two were destroyed in controlled explosions, while the third was analysed by explosives experts. Their analysis was that the bombers used Goma 2 ECO dynamite, which would be consistent with the 200lbs of explosives stolen from the Conchita mine that Trashorras is alleged to have supplied. Those who argue that ETA was behind the attacks have insisted that DNT was used.

Evidence refuting the PP claim of ETA involvement does not, however, mean that the charge against the accused of being an Islamic terror cell should be accepted. Rather, the politically charged atmosphere surrounding the trial makes it all the more imperative to insist that proper standards of proof are adhered to in

determining innocence or guilt.

And there are serious question marks hanging over the prosecution case against the defendants, including doubts over the forensic evidence. Police have admitted that evidence found at the scene of the crimes, including the unexploded bomb, was not “perfectly classified” and that there were delays in recording and analysing evidence.

Most importantly, the trial has exposed a network of police informants within a criminal fraternity, with which most of the defendants were associated.

According to the prosecution’s arguments, most of those directly responsible for the bombings died at Leganés. Among the seven suspects who blew themselves up were Serhane Ben Abdelmajid, known as “The Tunisian,” and Jamal Ahmidan, known as “The Chinaman.” Much of the prosecution’s case is related to the links between these two and the accused.

One state prosecutor has said that the perpetrators were most likely not an Al Qaeda cell, but were, rather, influenced by the organisation.

Most of the accused have pleaded innocence of any role in the events of March 11. The first to take the stand was Rabei Osman El Sayed Ahmed, known as “Mohammed the Egyptian.” Initially he refused to address the court, and said he would not even reply to his own lawyer. Subsequently he indicated that he would answer questions put to him through his lawyer. Declaring his innocence, he said he condemned the Madrid bombings, and also the September 11 attacks and the July 7 bombings in London.

Ahmed is currently appealing against his conviction in November in Italy of conspiring to participate in terrorist activities, for which he was sentenced to 10 years. He was extensively bugged in Milan. The recordings released during the trial were said to indicate that he was aware of the plan to bomb Madrid, but took no part in it. He is heard to say, “I wanted to plan [the Madrid plot] so I would be something unforgettable ... I was ready to blow myself up. But they stopped me.”

The trial had to be adjourned to allow his lawyer to hear the tapes in full. On his return to the dock, Ahmed denied that the voice on the tapes was his. He also claimed that the translations were 80 percent inaccurate. He had commented on the telephone about the news images, he said, but this did not mean he had any connection with the events. His lawyers have also indicated that he may be a fantasist.

His Italian defence lawyer has said that although there are connections with the Madrid bombers, there is “no concrete element” that he knew of the attacks. This is the pattern for several of the accused. Abdelilah el Fadual el Akil has admitted buying a car from Jamal Ahmidan, for example, but denies knowing that it had been used to transport explosives.

The picture that emerges is of a handful of petty criminals, mostly involved in drug deals, with a sideline in acting as police informants, willing to peddle any stories about each other. At least three of them have claimed that police officers warned them that they would be implicated in the bombings, and offered them some kind of deal.

One defendant, Rafa Zuhier, was at one point removed from the court for making faces. His long-term associate Rachid Aglif

admitted that he had known Jamal Ahmidan, but denied selling drugs with him to finance the terrorist group. Aglif said he had only ended up in court because of the lies Zuhier had told about him.

Zuhier, a petty crook and sometime police informant, was repeatedly reprimanded for his language but insisted that he was “super innocent.” He denied having anything to do with the attacks, adding that if he had he would not have been out partying on March 10, 11 and 14. He said that his only connection with the attacks was to have informed the Civil Guard “free of charge” that explosives were being sold. He then claimed that one of his Civil Guard contacts had advised him to leave Spain, as he was going to be connected to the bombings.

Abdelilah el Fadual el Akil also claims that the police offered to release him if he confessed to selling drugs to Jamal Ahmidan.

Many of the accused have links with the drugs trade. Zuhier alleged in court that he was approached by Trashorras, who offered to exchange explosives for drugs prior to the attacks. This is disputed by Trashorras, who claims that Zuhier approached him to obtain explosives. Trashorras is alleged to have received the stolen explosives from Raul Gonzalez Pelaez, who denies stealing the dynamite to exchange for cocaine. Ivan Granados Peña, who claims that Trashorras discussed moving explosives with him, was reportedly well known in the Asturian drug scene at the time of the attacks.

Another suspect, Sergio Alvarez, said that Trashorras gave him a sports bag to take to Jamal Ahmidan in Madrid. He says Trashorras told him it contained pirate CDs and he would receive €600 for the trip. He said it weighed some 30-40 kilos, and he thought it probably contained cannabis.

Trashorras met Jamal Ahmidan, with several others, at a outlet of McDonalds in Madrid. According to Rachid Aglif, the discussion at that meeting was entirely about the sale of cannabis. When police raided the house of Ahmad’s cousin Hamid, they found cannabis and ecstasy pills. Trashorras has admitted buying cannabis from Jamal Ahmidan. He claims that he did so in the capacity of a police informer. He says that he told police about the house in Chinchon, 50km from Madrid, where the bombs were assembled.

In testimony, a police source denied knowing anything about the house in Chinchon until after the explosions. In return for this information, Trashorras claims, officers offered to put him on a witness protection programme. He says officers told him they would arrange for him to be kept out of jail if he helped implicate some Arab suspects.

The trial is expected to last another four months. Evidence is likely to be heard until July, with sentencing expected in October.



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