

Spanish government denies contacts with ETA

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Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero on Monday denied claims by a leading Basque moderate that his Socialist government had made contact with armed Basque separatist group ETA.

"There is no truth in this," Zapatero, who has made countering terrorism one of his key policy initiatives since his election in March, told Punta Radio.

Earlier, Xabier Arzalluz, former president of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), in power at regional level, had said in a radio interview: "I know that they have talked and that they are continuing to talk," referring to government officials and the militant Basque group.

An interior ministry spokesman promptly denied the claim, insisting that the government "does not maintain discussions" with ETA, which has killed more than 800 people in the past 36 years in a violent campaign for an independent homeland in northern Spain and southern France.

Socialist Party secretary Jose Blanco also refuted Arzalluz's claim, saying Arzalluz perhaps found it "hard to accept that he has retired" from front line politics after stepping down in January, nearly 24 years after taking over the PNV.

Batasuna, ETA's banned political mouthpiece, likewise denied any contact between either ETA and the government or between itself and Zapatero's Socialist administration, saying any claims to the contrary were "lies".

Basque regional officials recently speculated that ETA, which took credit for nine minor bomb blasts in Spanish beach resorts this summer, is waging a "low-intensity" campaign to avoid comparison with the March 11 train bombings in Madrid that killed 191.

ETA was initially accused of the March 11 outrage but it subsequently emerged that those attacks were the work of Islamic radicals. ETA's last fatal attack was in May 2003 although last year the group said it would continue to target Spain's economy, and in particular the tourist industry.