

Basque ETA separatists call for unconditional dialogue

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The Basque separatist movement ETA called Thursday for the opening of a dialogue without prior conditions as a way of ending 35 years of conflict that have cost the lives of some 800 Spanish security forces and civilians plus 200 among the ETA ranks.

"The solution of the conflict" in the Basque country in northern Spain "will come from dialogue, negotiation and understanding," the politico-military organisation said in a statement published in the Basque daily newspaper Gara, which backs the campaign for independence.

"Nobody has the complete formula for the solution...the process of dialogue which will lead to an agreement requires the participation of all the parties," the statement said.

"The only choice is to organise an open and concrete process of dialogue" but one that should not have "prior conditions".

In the statement ETA, which is believed to have suffered a major setback with the arrest earlier this month in France of many of its most senior figures, made no mention of a ceasefire or truce.

It says that the Basque country, which straddles the border with France, is "occupied" and that its people "are suffering a slow and cruel death from France and Spain. The Basque country has no future under Spanish domination or the French yoke."

"The key to the solution of the conflict is the recognition of the right to self-determination of the Basque people," the statement says. "When our rights are guaranteed and our people recognised the conflict will end."

The ETA statement comes as its banned political wing Batasuna has said it will put forward an alternative to a plan proposed by moderate Basque nationalists.

This would make the Basque country a region "freely associated with Spain" after a referendum which would take place only if ETA renounced violence.

