

Spain vows to keep up pressure on Basque group ETA after arrest of leader

BY: DANIEL WOOLLS, The Associated Press. October 4, 2004.

MADRID, Spain

Spain said Monday that it was on the verge of crushing the Basque separatist group ETA following the arrest of its alleged leader and seizure of a vast weapons arsenal in raids in France.

Interior Minister Jose Antonio Alonso called Sunday's operation "an extremely hard blow to the terrorist gang."

Twenty alleged ETA members were arrested in addition to Mikel Albizu Iriarte, considered the group's political leader. He was captured with his partner, Soledad Iparraguirre, near Pau in southwestern France.

"ETA is now more weakened and is in very bad shape but ... we must not ease up for even a minute in the fight against ETA's terrorism," Alonso told Spanish state television.

"This means telling the police and the civil guard something that they already know perfectly well - that they must not halt for one minute a maximum of police pressure," he said.

Spain's previous conservative government had said ETA was on its last legs following the arrests of nearly 200 members over the past few years.

But the weapons and explosives seized in Sunday's raids in France showed ETA was still a potent force, Alonso said.

He gave no numbers but Spain's leading newspaper, El Pais, said it included 880 pounds of dynamite and 40,000 rounds of ammunition.

"Clearly, the material that was seized - the weapons as well as the explosives and the detonators, etc. - show that the gang had a major arsenal," Alonso said.

France's government described the arrests as a turning point in the fight against the armed group that since the 1960s has carried out bombings and assassinations in Spain for an independent Basque state.

Mikel Albizu and Iparraguirre, both aged 43, had been on the run since 1993.

They were with their daughter when they were arrested, police said. They had false papers and refused to answer questions but were identified by police agents and, Spain said, by their fingerprints.

ETA militants have long crossed into peaceful Basque provinces of southwest France to take refuge or make plans. French and Spanish authorities worked together to hunt them down.

ETA is classified as a terrorist organization by the European Union and the United States. It has claimed or has been blamed for more than 800 deaths.

Mikel Albizu, who uses the alias Mikel Antza, is thought to have taken over as a top leader after police devastated ETA in 1992 by arresting most of its senior members.

He has not been accused of having participated in attacks but was allegedly part of the group's so-called executive committee and made the group's decisions together with Ignacio Gracia Arregui, a former leader of ETA's military wing arrested in September 2000 in France.

Albizu eluded police last April during a raid that netted an ETA logistics chief, Feliz Ignacio Esparza.

Iparraguirre, who uses the alias "Anboto," has a more militant past. She comes from a family of ETA fighters and allegedly took part in dozens of attacks from 1984 through 1992 that together killed 15 people and injured more than 20 injured.

All but one of those arrested Sunday were picked up in towns between Pau and Bayonne in southwest France.

The other suspect was arrested in the northern Spanish city of Burgos and is thought to have planted bombs for ETA at power installations in September. His wife was among those detained in France.