

Series of explosions mark ETA's return

At least seven small bombs have exploded in Spain's seaside resorts this month

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Compared with the ruinous attacks that struck Spain in March, the bombings over the past 14 days in the northern provinces might be expected to attract little notice: Seven weak explosives, wrapped in plastic bags, and weighing less than 300 grams, caused only slight injuries and minor property damage.

But in Spain, a country that has suffered domestic terrorism for the past 30 years, the explosions were an unnerving reminder that ETA, the Basque terrorist group, was still a threat.

The attacks on Spain's northern coast that began August 7 in resort towns like Ribadesella and Santander and occurred as recently as Saturday in Sanxenxo and Baiona are not, historically speaking, unusual.

ETA (the initials stand for "Basque Homeland and Freedom") has a history of mounting "summer campaigns" intended to disrupt the country's profitable tourist industry.

These bombings, however, are significant for several reasons. They abruptly ended speculation, rampant since March 11, that the Basque group was on the verge of declaring a truce. ETA may have intended the bombs to reaffirm its presence and counter the widespread perception that it is foundering. But for many, the blasts had the opposite effect, underscoring the organization's decline.

The ETA bombings were the first under the government of Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero. Despite declaring a commitment to fight terrorism, Madrid remains guarded in its public show of concern. Emphasizing that it "rejects such acts - especially in places where people gather," an Interior Ministry spokesperson, who wished to remain unidentified, says that the "investigation is still open, and even though these bombs were not powerful and caused no real injuries, we do not want to minimize this kind of activity. But we do not want to maximize it, either."

Others willing to speculate about ETA's fate, however, say the group has reached a nadir. "Right now ETA is extremely marginalized," says Juan Aviles, of the University Institute for the Investigation of Internal Security. "And they're at their weakest point in 30 years. Logically, they

should lay down their arms, but they aren't logical, and they haven't given up the fight. Sometimes when a group is weakest, it acts most dangerously."

ETA's perceived weakness has several roots. Effective police work and a new willingness among other nations to cooperate with Spain's efforts to capture and extradite ETA members have led to the arrest and trial of a number of suspected affiliates. In April, several commando leaders armed with explosives were arrested in southern France. That same month, police discovered a large arsenal of ETA's weapons in Saint-Michel, just six miles across the Spanish border. Experts now estimate the number of active ETA members to be as low as 200.

The changing political landscape has also diminished ETA's support. While the current administration's position toward ETA nearly mirrors the stance taken by former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar and his Popular Party, the improved relationship between Madrid and Spain's autonomous regions has further weakened the terrorist group.

While both Aznar and Zapatero declared unacceptable the center-right Basque Nationalist Party's 2003 Ibarretxe Plan, which would grant the Basque territories greater autonomy, the fact that a mainstream party would adopt goals once embraced solely by radicals has simply made ETA less relevant. "We know that legitimate Basque nationalism is stronger, and that it wants more strength, which it won't get by associating with ETA," says Mr. Aviles. It is the public's growing intolerance for ETA's violence, however, that has most contributed to the group's decline. As memory has faded of the time when ETA's tactics were among the few means to resist Franco, the influence of victim's rights groups has grown. Acts like the 1997 slaying of Miguel Angel Blanco helped turn the tide. A University of the Basque Country poll found that 86 percent of all Spaniards, and 71 percent of Basques, now reject ETA. And that rejection has only become sharper since March 11.

Ironically, the emergence of Islamist terrorists in Spain may have helped provoke this latest series of bombings. "Just because March 11 happened does not mean ETA will simply fade away," says Sebestyen Gorka, an analyst with Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor in London and a terrorism expert at Germany's Marshall University. "It has a challenge now to remain on the radar."

Despite drawing public attention these latest attacks may provide further evidence of the group's decline. ETA's past "summer campaigns" have tended to be more deadly. Government officials have suggested

that the relative impotence of the recent blasts might be a sign that ETA is lowering the intensity in response to heightened public hostility. Mr. Gorka agrees. "If they thought they had the support," he says, "they'd be doing the kinds of things they've done in the past. This is their dying gasp."