

Eta goes into demise after al-Qaeda's train bombs in Madrid

Basque separatists have not dared stage a big attack because of revulsion at last year's bombings, while Spanish anti-terror laws are also showing results, writes Leslie Crawford

Last year's train bombings in Madrid left Spain in a state of shock. But the country is now waking up to an unintended consequence of al-Qaeda's first strike in Europe: the apparent demise of Eta, the violent Basque separatist group.

According to police, politicians and security analysts, the events of last year have effectively ended Eta's 37-year insurgency.

The March 11 2004 train bombings, initially blamed on Eta, left 192 people dead and injured thousands. In the Basque country in northern Spain, police say the tragedy marked a turning point in their fight against Eta, which had been viewed until then as Spain's biggest security threat.

"The massacre provoked such revulsion that Eta has not dared stage a big attack since then," says Roberto Seijo, a leader of the Basque police trade union Erne. "Eta cannot match al-Qaeda's scale of terror. Even among Eta's own supporters, there is no stomach for the continued use of terror as a political instrument."

Tough anti-terrorist laws, implemented in 2002 to crush the Basque insurgency, have also helped to stamp out Eta violence. The laws allow the police to arrest anyone connected to the outlawed organisation.

Joint raids by French and Spanish police have netted hundreds of Eta suspects in recent years and busted many of the group's hideouts in southern France. Batasuna, Eta's political wing, was outlawed in 2002.

In March, Spanish judges will open the largest trial ever held against Eta, with 62 defendants accused of

forming part of the group's political, financial and propaganda network. A high-security pavilion is being built on the outskirts of Madrid for the proceedings.

After four decades of Eta fighting for an independent Basque state, Mr Seijo believes it is now looking for "an honourable exit".

The first indications that the group was under pressure to abandon arms came in an open letter signed by Eta prisoners last summer. "Never in the history of our organisation have we been so weak," the prisoners said. "Eta is dying a slow death," the prisoners wrote. They concluded: "It is pointless to fight a war on the basis of threats that are not carried out. In future, the strategy and tactics to achieve our goals as a people should be left to the nationalist left and its political organisation [Batasuna]."

Basque separatists have not staged a deadly attack since May 2003 - the longest period they have gone without killing, though there was a 14-month truce ending in November 1999. Police dismiss recent bomb attacks against petrol stations as "propaganda stunts", designed only to disrupt everyday life.

There are now about 700 Eta prisoners in Spanish and French jails, compared with police estimates of fewer than 70 active members at large: a ratio of 10 to one, which security officials say is a measure of Eta's terminal decline.

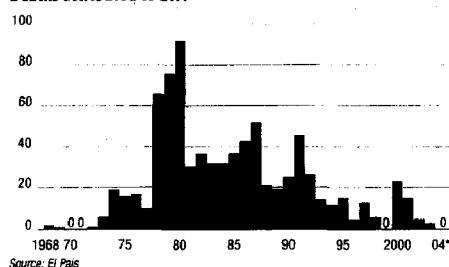
But the impotence of the separatist group is also an obstacle to its demise.

"Eta's problem is how to abandon arms when it is staring at defeat," says Kepa



Police inspect site of ETA car bomb in Madrid, Jan 2000

Deaths attributed to ETA

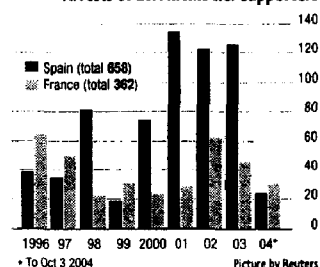


Source: El País

Total: 817

Civilians	339
Civil Guard	198
National police	145
Armed forces	97
Local police	24
Basque police	13
Catalan police	1

Arrests of ETA members/supporters



* To Oct 3 2004

Picture by Reuters

Aulestia, an expert on Basque separatism and a former member of Eta who renounced the group when Spain became a democracy. "It needs something to call a victory."

In a further blow to Eta, its goal of independence has been hijacked by mainstream nationalists, for whom the Basque country's broad measure of self-government - including tax raising and spending powers, and control over its own police force, education and health services - is no longer enough.

The Basque Nationalist party, which has controlled the regional government for 23 years, is wooing Eta sympathisers ahead of regional

elections in May, with a plan to transform Spain's three Basque provinces into an "associated free state" with Spain.

The plan has few chances of coming to fruition, as it will be quashed by the Spanish parliament. Nevertheless, the forthcoming Basque poll is a problem for Eta, which would have to declare a permanent ceasefire in order to allow Batasuna to contest the elections.

"Without an end to hostilities, Batasuna faces extinction as a political force," says Mr Seijo.

Police believe Eta has already initiated contact with the Madrid government to establish the terms of a peace settlement. Juan José

Ibarretxe, president of the Basque regional government, is also confident that contact is under way: "I would be very surprised if that were not the case."

But Jordi Sevilla, minister for public administration and the government's main troubleshooter on Basque issues, told the Financial Times: "There have been no contacts with Eta. As a government, we would only accept talks with Eta after it announced an end to violence, and then only to talk about the surrender of its weapons."

Mr Sevilla is guardedly optimistic about the chances of ending a conflict that has claimed more than 800 lives. But he is also wary of the

complications. Eta's leaders - and it is unclear who they now are - are probably young and inexperienced following the last wave of arrests in October, which netted 44 Eta suspects including Mikel Albizu, Eta's alleged political leader since 1993.

"We are close to the end of violence, but only at the beginning of the peace process," says Gorka Espiau, a spokesman for a Basque peace group known as Elkarrri.

"Eta must give the first step, but it is the duty of politicians to make this possible. And the snag is that much of Spain does not want a peace process. They want to see Eta defeated."