

# Comment & Analysis

TERRORISM

## 'A place in the history of infamy' – how the government's assumption and misjudgment shook Spain

Does the pursuit of economic growth end in happiness? See Comment

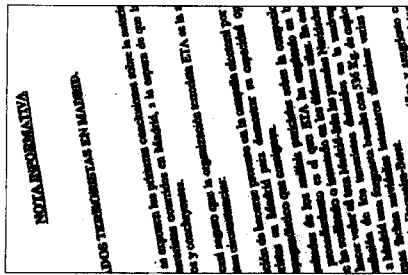


The bastards have finally done it. Those were the first words that José María Aznar, the Spanish prime minister, said to his advisers on the morning of March 11, after being notified of the bombings in Madrid. Angel Acebes, interior minister, phoned Mr Aznar within minutes of the attacks. There were reports of explosions at the Atocha railway terminal, Mr Acebes said, and many dead.

In the early-morning rush hour of March 11 – just three days before Spain's general election – 10 bombs exploded within five minutes. The bombs, which were in four trains packed with commuters, killed 190 passengers and injured more than 1,400. The first explosions were at 7.34am, as two trains approached Madrid's busy Atocha terminal. The other trains were running late, and the bombs exploded at Santa Eugenia and El Pozo, stations further down the line.

"If the bombs had gone off as all the trains arrived at Atocha, we would have had a tragedy of Twin Tower proportions," says a high-ranking Spanish diplomat.

Eta, the Basque separatist group, had been seeking to stage just such an attack. On Christmas Eve, police had arrested two Eta suspects, as they loaded rucksacks packed with explosives on a train bound for Madrid. Another terrorist attack had been foiled during the Christmas holidays at the ski resort of Baqueira-Beret, a



The memo: the government blamed Eta

favourite Pyrenean playground of royalty and politicians. And in late February, as Spain prepared for a general election, police had intercepted a van loaded with half a tonne of explosives, again bound for the Spanish capital. The driver and his companion admitted to belonging to Eta.

For Mr Aznar, who narrowly escaped an Eta assassination attempt in 1996, March 11 marked the beginning of his fall. He had spent eight years as prime minister in an implacable fight against Eta to prevent such a massacre.

The attacks now placed his carefully choreographed exit from Spanish politics in jeopardy. His proud legacy included a thriving economy, big strides in the war against terrorism and the stewardship of a conservative government untainted by corruption scandals. Mariano Rajoy, Mr Aznar's handpicked successor, had been set to



Rescue workers at the scene of the train explosion in Madrid

On the morning of March 11, just three days before the country's general election, 10 bombs exploded in Madrid. Leslie Crawford and Joshua Levitt give an account of the four days that changed the nation

lead the Popular party to victory in the March 14 election. In the run-up to the poll, people close to the prime minister said he looked relaxed and happy.

But the bomb attacks changed everything. Within three days, Mr Aznar's Popular party had lost the election. His government faced accusations of manipulating information about the terrorist attacks to help the party at the polls. Some European governments believe Spain put the continent at risk by pinning the blame on Eta, and sticking to that, long after evidence pointed to the involvement of an Islamist group. Mr Aznar's reputation lay in tatters.

"At the beginning, we all thought it was Eta," says Alfredo Timmermans, one of Mr Aznar's closest aides. "The police, the secret service, even the president of the Basque regional government. We all thought it was Eta because we had stopped the same kind of attacks on three separate occasions."

The prime minister, Mr Timmermans says, was shaken but in control. "He informed the King, summoned his crisis cabinet, made sure the emergency services were working properly," Mr Timmermans says.

At Atocha, however, police immediately had their doubts. "If this was Eta, it was working in a very different way," says an officer of the fire brigade who worked shoulder to shoulder with the police explosives squad. "The impact of the explosions pointed to a kind of bomb and a type of explosives that Eta had not used before."

After 30 years in the front line of the battle against Eta, Spanish police are able to distinguish different kinds of bombs by the stench they leave behind. The acrid pall that hung over Atocha pointed to plastic explosives rather than the stale dynamite Eta usually steals from silos in France.

It is not known how soon these doubts were conveyed to Mr Acebes or to Mr Aznar. But Mr Acebes assisted at a lunch-time press conference on the day of the bombings that part of the evidence pointing to Eta was precisely the explosives used in the train attacks. Mr Acebes was resolute. "The government has no doubt that Eta was responsible for the attacks," he said. "Unfortunately, this time, Eta achieved its objective."

Earlier, Arnaldo Otegi, a leader of the outlawed Batasuna party, widely regarded as an Eta mouthpiece, had taken the unusual step of denying Eta's involvement in the attacks. Mr Otegi said he believed "operatives of the Arab resistance" were to blame.

But Mr Acebes declared that it was "absolutely intolerable to contemplate any kind of intoxication [lies] designed to divert attention from those who were responsible for the tragedy".

At 2:30 pm, Mr Aznar made his first public statement on the bombings. "March 11 already has a place in the history of infamy," he said.

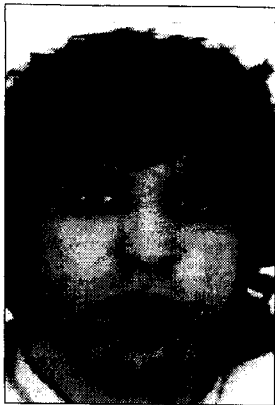
Mr Aznar, as is his custom, did not mention Eta by name, but the prime minister made clear that the danger facing Spain came from home-grown terrorists rather than foreign ones. He must have known, even then, that the Spanish electorate would not be indifferent to the authorship of the Madrid bombings.

"If the government could pin the blame on Eta, the Popular party would be the clear winner in the elections. If, on the other hand, Islamic extremists

were responsible, Mr Aznar's party might face a backlash for its staunch support for the US occupation of Iraq," said one British diplomat.

"The US invasion was deeply unpopular in Spain, and it was not inconceivable that voters would punish the Popular party for making Spain a target of Islamist retribution."

Mr Aznar issued instructions that the government should be unwavering in its condemnation of Eta. Ana



The accused: Jamal Zougam

Palacio, Spain's foreign minister, sent a telegram to her ambassadors on Thursday afternoon. It read: "In relation with today's brutal attacks, and attempts to sow confusion about the authorship of those attacks, please note that the Ministry of Interior has confirmed that Eta was responsible. This is confirmed by the explosives employed and the pattern of the attacks, which are those habitually used by Eta, as well as other information that is not yet public, for obvious reasons."

Ms Palacio urged ambassadors to "use every occasion to confirm the authorship of Eta, and thus help to dissipate any doubts that certain interested parties might want to raise in relation to who is behind these attacks".

By 8:30am in New York - 2:30pm in Madrid - Spain was lobbying the United Nations for a Security Council resolution explicitly blaming Eta for the Madrid bombings.

Some Security Council members, including Russia, raised questions about the wisdom of blaming Eta at such an early stage. But Spain was insistent. Ms Palacio phoned the capitals of reluctant countries to persuade them to put Eta in the resolution.

One Security Council diplomat said the US tried to find an alternative resolution whereby the UN would condemn the bombing in general terms then express its solidarity with Spain in the fight against terrorism, including Eta, which has killed 800 people in three decades of fighting for an independent Basque state. But Spain would not accept that formulation.

Diplomats say they were left with the uncomfortable choice of defeating a resolution, which would send a message of disunity, or standing by one of the Security Council's members during a time of need. They opted for the latter. The resolution condemned "the terrorist group Eta" for the attacks.

As indications emerged that Eta was not the sole suspect, Security Council ambassadors began expressing deep disquiet, even anger, at the Spanish government. "By early afternoon on

Thursday, police and the interior ministry were beginning to discard Eta because the explosives were of the wrong kind," says a British diplomat. "Put together with other factors - the absence of a warning phone call, and the scope of the attacks - it was clear that this was far beyond Eta's logistical capabilities."

Three hours after the bombings, police were alerted to a suspect van parked near the railway station at Alcalá de Henares, a town on the route of the four ill-fated trains. Inside the stolen van, police found a tape recording in Arabic of verses of the Koran, wrapping material with traces of explosives and seven detonators.

"The evidence was not conclusive," says Antonio Franco, editor of El Periódico de Catalunya, a Barcelona daily. "But from that moment on, it was irresponsible for the government to speak only of Eta."

Mr Franco, along with other newspaper editors, was phoned by the prime minister to reinforce the message that Eta was the culprit.

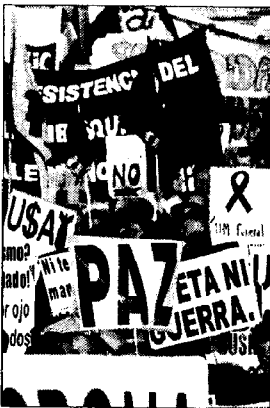
Jesús Ceberio, editor of El País, Spain's leading daily, says Mr Aznar called him twice on Thursday. "Aznar was brief. He said he was sure it was Eta. He said Eta's denial was not to be believed. The fact that Eta was pointing to Islamic terrorists was a cynical attempt to distract attention from their own responsibility."

Mr Ceberio, whose newspaper has socialist sympathies and was a critic of the Aznar government, says he was surprised by the phone calls. "I had not spoken to the prime minister in years, and suddenly, two phone calls on the same day."

Nevertheless, he says he interpreted the calls as a measure of the gravity of the situation. "When the prime minister calls and gives you his word that this is the work of Eta, you feel duty-bound to believe him. I understood that the prime minister was privy to information that allowed him to be so categorical."

By Thursday afternoon, Mr Franco and Mr Ceberio began to receive details from their own intelligence sources on the progress of the investigation.

In addition, they were aware that, while Eta had tried to put bombs on trains before, the separatist group had been so successfully infiltrated by Spanish spies that most of its planned attacks had been foiled. In 2003 Eta killed three people, the lowest number in three decades. The synchronised bombings in Madrid must have involved at least a dozen separatists. How, Mr Franco wondered, could they have planned such a large-scale atroc-



The people: 'Give us the truth'

ity undetected? There was also the unusual fact of an Eta denial.

"The government calculated that it could delay making a link between al-Qaeda and the Madrid attacks for two or three days," surmises Mr Franco. "And that was all it needed to clear the hurdle of the elections."

During the evening of March 11th, Al Quds Al Arabi, a London newspaper, received an e-mail from a group calling itself the Abu Hafis Al Masri Brigades, claiming responsibility for the Madrid bombings.

The Spanish government said it believed the claim was a hoax, and continued to insist that Eta remained the prime suspect in the attacks. Still, Mr Acebes said the government had opened "a new line of investigation" following the discovery of the stolen van, though he attached little importance to the Arabic tape.

At this point, Mr Franco says, "the government was putting its international credibility at risk by not informing its allies properly".

In Berlin, Otto Schily, the German interior minister, says he was shocked by the massacre in Madrid but did not believe European security was at risk. He had been assured by Mr Acebes that this was the work of Basque separatists, who had never struck outside Spain.

Like many other European politicians - including Silvio Berlusconi and Javier Solana - Mr Schily publicly condemned Eta on the day of the attacks. He even went on television to argue that the massacre did not constitute a threat to Germany.

A senior aide to Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, told the Financial Times that the information provided by Spanish police had "lacked clarity", in particular with regard to the origin of the explosives used in the attacks.

On Sunday, March 14, the day of the Spanish elections, Mr Schröder summoned a meeting of his inner circle of security advisers. Mr Schily said after the meeting that Spain had provided information "with a certain delay".

Konrad Freiberg, head of the German police trade union, was less forgiving. He said that Spain "had withheld information in a completely irresponsible way".

It was only on Sunday, three days after the Madrid bombings, that Mr Schily acknowledged the possibility that Islamist terrorists were behind the attacks and the issue had to be addressed "very seriously".

The first time Mr Acebes acknowledged that an Islamist group, and not Eta, was the main suspect was on Saturday evening, after police arrested three Moroccans and two Indians in connection with the attacks.

On Thursday night, police had discovered a rucksack with a bomb that had failed to explode. It had been taken to a police station and left with other items - bags, dolls, briefcases, prams - that had belonged to the victims of the train attacks. A mobile phone rang inside the rucksack at 7:40pm, alerting police to its contents. The bomber had set the timer incorrectly by confusing a.m. with p.m.

Police traced the phone to a shop in Lavapiés, an immigrant neighbourhood in Madrid. The shop belonged to Jamal Zougam, a 30-year-old Moroccan businessman who had lived in Spain since the age of 12. Mr Zougam now stands accused of planning and carrying out the attacks. Spanish newspapers have linked him to radical Islamic groups in Morocco, but Mr Zougam has pleaded not guilty before the investigating

magistrate.

The government's delay in investigating an Islamist link may stem from a belief that al-Qaeda was not a threat to Spain - despite rhetoric to the contrary.

"Islamic terrorism was not a priority," says José Manuel Sánchez, of the Sindicato Unificado de la Policía, the main police trade union.

Under government orders, the police had reassigned intelligence operatives who monitored Islamist groups in Spain to the crime and homicide brigades, because of a lack of staff.

Intelligence gathering is also hampered by a lack of resources. "We receive intelligence reports from other countries, and they will lie around, unread, for months because of a lack of translators," Mr Sánchez says.

"In theory, all reports end up on the prime minister's desk, but there is a lot we could do to improve co-ordination."



The winner: Zapatero, Spain's new leader

"In the first hours after the attacks, all the police reports indicated that Eta was responsible," Mr Sánchez says. "We thought it was a hardline faction - like the Real IRA - which was prepared to commit atrocities that had never been carried out before. We were wrong. And we have to analyse why we failed to detect that Islamists were planning an attack."

On Friday morning, however, the government had two important reports on its desk, says Mr Sánchez. First, the contents of the stolen van. And second, an analysis of the unexploded bomb, indicating that its plastic explosives had been manufactured in Spain and had been stolen only recently. This should have taken suspicion away from Eta, which uses explosives stolen in France.

"By early Friday," Mr Sánchez says, "the analysis provided by Mr Acebes at his press briefings did not correspond to the facts."

Mr Sánchez believes that the interior minister was only following orders. "It was the prime minister who got it wrong," he says.

By Saturday night, radio and television stations were carrying reports of the arrests of Moroccans. Crowds gathered outside Popular party headquarters, chanting: "Give us the truth!" Grief had given way to anger. A belief took hold that the government had withheld information in the run-up to the election. The next day Spanish voters ousted the Popular party from power.

Additional reporting by Mark Turner and Hugh Williamson