

Eta on brink of ceasefire

Public revulsion after Madrid bombings and change in government may lead to abandonment of violence by Basque separatist group

Giles Tremlett in San Sebastian, northern Spain

Monday March 29, 2004

The Guardian

The Basque separatist group Eta may be about to call a ceasefire in response to the Islamist terror attacks in Madrid and the subsequent change in government, according to sources in Spain's northern Basque country.

With the 190 deaths caused by the Madrid train bombings provoking revulsion against terrorism, while also making Eta's attacks look insignificant, many analysts believe the weakened separatist group is considering a truce in its 35-year campaign of violence.

"I and many others think that given the situation ... Eta is obliged to call a cease-fire," said Julen Madariaga, an Eta founder now distanced from the group. Mr Madariaga said that ceasefire rumours had started well before the attacks in Madrid on March 11, but had grown since then. "The tragedy in Madrid is, in itself, a strong enough reason," he added.

Kepa Aulestia, an analyst for the Basque-based El Correo newspaper, said Eta may need a strategic truce partially because the group has been so weakened by police action in recent years. He warned, however, that after a previous 18-month unilateral ceasefire that started in 1998 was used by Eta to rearm and regroup before returning to violence, it would have to offer a lot more guarantees this time if it wanted people to believe there was more to any future truce.

Mr Aulestia said authorities knew little about how the organisation, in disarray and harried by police in Spain and France, was being led. "We don't even know if there is one person in charge, or who takes the decisions," he said.

"I think even the leadership of Eta does not know what it is going to do right now."

Second-guessing the terrorist group's leadership was, anyway, a difficult thing to do as it did not always follow recognisable logic, he warned.

What has become clear over the past year is that Eta is a shadow of its former self.

Its last killing was 10 months ago. Last year it killed three people, the lowest annual toll - excluding years with truces - for a group that has claimed 850 victims over the past 30 years. About 250 of its suspected members or collaborators have been arrested over the past two years.

Eta, which saw its allied political party Batasuna banned recently, may, however, conclude there is no political advantage to a ceasefire. "They will also ask themselves, what do we get in return?" observed Mr Aulestia.

Analysts warned it was clear that no Spanish government would talk to Eta unless, at the very least, it abandoned violence permanently. Observers agreed, however, that it was still possible Eta would welcome the new socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, due to take office next month, with a fresh round of violence.

"An attack by Eta now would be bad for everyone but especially for Eta, as it would wipe out any chance it has of influencing the political debate," warned Gorka Espiau, a spokesman for the Elkarri peace movement that supports dialogue with Eta.

"These days all sectors of Basque society, including the majority of Batasuna's voters, are against violence," he said.

Last week Eta issued a statement proposing dialogue with the socialists, but Mr Zapatero said: "The only communiqué I await from Eta, as do the vast majority of Spaniards, is one in which it abandons violence."

That only leaves Eta the option of negotiating with the Basque regional government, which is led by moderate, non-violent nationalists, in the hope that it might take up some of their demands.

Those include the creation of a Basque state made up of parts of northern Spain and southern France. The Spanish constitution does not recognise any Basque right to self-determination.

The Basque regional premier, Juan José Ibarretxe, of the moderate Basque Nationalist Party, is seen as having moved some way towards Eta's position by presenting a plan, backed by his regional parliament, to convert the Basque country into an "associated free state".

That plan was rejected outright by outgoing prime minister José María Aznar, who refused to discuss it. Mr Zapatero also opposes the plan, but has said he is prepared to talk to Mr Ibarretxe.

Reasons being given for Eta choosing now to declare a ceasefire include the unexpected burst of international publicity the outgoing government gave it when it initially blamed Eta for the Madrid bombings. Eta had, previously, made its own attempt at spoiling the elections by driving a van bomb into Madrid.