

Eta resumes attacks as Spain refuses to make concessions

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FOR MANY analysts in the Basque country, the separatist organization Eta is in terminal decline, but the truth is that despite all the police surveillance deployed by the Spanish police, Eta has struck five times in the last few weeks.

Since 1979, when Eta started the so-called "summer campaign" to deter foreign tourists, the group has carried out 150 attacks against resorts. Seven people have been killed, one of them a young woman Eta militant, and 100 injured.

The latest attack, believed to be the work of Eta, happened yesterday, when two bombs exploded in the north-west coastal cities of Sanxenxo and Baiona, injuring four.

In a recent attack, bombs went off in the north of Spain. On the crowded sunny beach of Gijon, the visitors, many of them foreign tourists, could not believe their eyes when dozens of policemen, ambulances and a helicopter rushed onto the beach minutes after an Eta militant, holding his nose to distort his voice, had called the police to announce the bomb. "It was shocking, it was like watching a movie. I saw a black ball of smoke coming from a grassy patch near the beach," said Tino, a bottled water seller.

According to the Spanish police, the bombs were packed with 200 grams of explosives, small by usual standards. But after over a year without any attacks, the question many people are asking is why now?

"Eta has been waiting for the new government to send conciliatory signs, such as moving the prisoners back to the region, or testing its promises of a wider autonomy for the Basque country. This has not happened and Eta has decided to strike again," said Kepa Aulestia, a political analyst in the region. The answer from the socialist government was clear-cut. "We won't give in to blackmail and have nothing to negotiate with assassins," said a government source.

The latest attacks are at odds with a recent declaration of Arnaldo Otegi, leader of the banned Batasuna party, allegedly the political wing of Eta. "I'm convinced that Eta is willing to abandon violence," said Otegi, 47, who previously served a jail sentence for helping in an Eta kidnapping. No one in the region believes that there could be a split

between Batasuna and Eta. "Unlike what happened between Sinn Fein and the IRA, here it is Eta's voice that prevails," said Aulestia.

The recent bombings come as a blow for many Basques, who thought that 11 March marked a watershed for political violence in Spain. There was enormous relief in the region once it was known that Eta was not involved in the Madrid train attacks which killed 191 people and left more than 1,400 injured. "There is no room for violence anymore," said Julen Madariaga, one of Eta's founders in the early '60s. Madariaga believes that the organisation is an obstacle to achieving an independent Basque territory.

Eta has claimed responsibility for more than 800 deaths since 1964. Despite many arrests in recent years, it has never been dismantled. Most of the two million people who live in the three-province Basque country want to keep all the considerable political and economic rights they enjoy. Many want more autonomy and a minority of 15% demands total independence. "The Basque country is split nearly equally in half between nationalists and those who want to remain Spanish," said university professor Francisco Llera Ramos. "Any solution that would satisfy one side will not appeal to the other, so we can never solve the problem." For Spaniards, Basque separatism threatens the foundations of its young democracy.

If the Basques are allowed to go their own way, what is going to stop Catalonia and other regions doing the same? But for many Basques, it is a question of self-determination for an ancient people who speak a non-Indo-European language and who throughout the ages have resisted foreign domination of their green mountains and valleys on the Iberian Peninsula's northern coast. "I'm Basque, not Spanish," said physics university teacher Jose Ramon Etxebarria, 56, who prefers to speak Basque and carries an unofficial identity card rather than a Spanish one. "I'm Basque not because I don't want to be Spanish but because I'm Basque." Almost every month, thousands of demonstrators march through the streets of the Basque capital cities to ask Eta to lay down its arms. But many of them demand a more humanitarian treatment for Eta prisoners as well.

In San Sebastian, with the backdrop of a magnificent bay, locals and tourists alike stroll along the promenade. There are Basque flags and banners reading "Presoak Euskal Herrira" (Bring the prisoners home). Maria Isabel Goikoetxea looks thoughtful. She, along with two dozen women and a few men have gathered for their weekly protest in order to draw tourists' attention to their children's situation in the prisons. Most of them have been accused of being Eta militants or collaborators

"Spain's democracy is a fraud. Our children are far away in the south, the law says that they should be in this region. It's very difficult for us to visit them. The government is punishing us too."