

## Spain and the Basques

# Farewell to arms?

No one should be surprised by the Spanish government's rejection of a call for peace talks by ETA, the armed Basque separatist movement, since there was no mention of it being ready to abjure violence and surrender weapons. Jose Luis Zapatero, the socialist prime minister, is no less tough on terrorism than his conservative predecessor, Jose Maria Aznar, and has refused to deal with the group unless it gives a commitment to end its 37-year armed struggle. But ETA's latest statement reflects changing times: the group has endorsed a formula for negotiations announced by Batasuna, its political wing, under which Batasuna would deal with the government, while ETA would handle issues such as prisoners in Spanish and French jails.

Parallels are often drawn between the Spanish-Basque issue and Northern Ireland. But one key difference is that Sinn Fein is part of the political process whereas Batasuna has been banned since 2002: thus the potential significance of Mr Zapatero's recent comment that he will "listen" to Batasuna if "they are brave and reject terrorism."

Another big difference is that ETA and Batasuna are now outflanked by the mainstream Basque Nationalist party, which is campaigning for an enhanced status that goes beyond the extensive

powers the region has had since 1979. If they want to take part in that, ETA will have to stop bombing. What matters in Madrid is whether ETA's shift is tactical or real — and whether the "free association" plan, closely watched in Catalonia, poses a secessionist danger to the already devolved, and nervous, Spanish state.

Mr Zapatero can afford to be firm precisely because ETA is weak and demoralised. Last October its political leader and other key figures were seized along with a huge arms cache. And since last March's train bombings, carried out by Islamist extremists, the group has shown there is method in its madness — a series of non-lethal bomb blasts contrasting with al-Qaida's indiscriminate terror. Like the IRA, it is looking for a way out.

Another lesson is that it makes sense to be creative about the sequence of an end to violence. If preconditions are too tough, it may never happen; and once a peace process is under way it is smart to avoid holding it hostage by insisting on full and immediate weapons decommissioning. Timing is crucial — an important point for Ariel Sharon as Mahmoud Abbas, the new Palestinian president, tries to curb attacks by Hamas extremists in Gaza. Circumstances differ from conflict to conflict. But toughness that is followed by flexibility can be a winner.