

## ***Eta ready for ceasefire, Basque leader insists***

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Hopes rose yesterday that Eta, the Basque separatist group, was about to declare an end to its 30-year struggle for independence from Spain.

Arnaldo Otegi, the leader of Batasuna, Eta's political wing, told a Basque newspaper that he was convinced that the group was ready to give up violence. "Their (Eta) latest statements, taking a clear position towards the new Government of Spain to sit down and talk, point in that direction," said Senor Otegi in the interview, published on the website of Deia, a pro-Basque nationalist newspaper.

His comments were published before tomorrow's Homeland Day celebrations in the Basque country. Last month newspapers reported that intelligence officials in Madrid believed that Eta was planning to make a significant announcement to coincide with Homeland Day.

After the socialist victory in Spain's general election on March 14, Eta called for dialogue with the incoming government while pledging to maintain its campaign of violence for independence. But the group is probably weaker now than at any time in its history, with more members in prison than at liberty. It was dealt a blow last week when French police dismantled a bomb-making factory and captured three senior Eta commanders. Eta was responsible for the deaths of three people last year, the lowest toll since it began its campaign of violence in 1968.

El Pais, Spain's leading daily newspaper, said in an editorial yesterday that all that was left for Eta was to disband, "precisely because they are not Islamist suicide bombers". The Basque group had earlier condemned the Madrid March 11 attacks as "indiscriminately against the civil population". The appeal for dialogue recalled manoeuvres by the Provisional IRA in 1994, a few months before it called its first lengthy ceasefire. The IRA was again forced to open a significant breach in its ideology after the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, when it decommissioned weaponry. Eta, weakened by the relentless judicial and security battle waged against it by the outgoing Government of Jose Maria Aznar, now appears to be weighing the consequences of March 11, when Islamist terrorists murdered 190 people in attacks on Madrid's commuter trains. The Madrid massacre, for which Eta was initially blamed by Spanish intelligence and the Government, may have given the group's internal debate a strong push towards calling a ceasefire. Eta has killed more than 840 people during more than 40 years of armed struggle for a Basque homeland in northeastern Spain

and southwestern France. It is listed as a terrorist group by the European Union and the United States.

Mainstream Basque nationalists have urged Madrid for years to follow Britain's example in opening a dialogue with Sinn Fein, the IRA's political wing. Eta has publicly urged Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, the incoming Spanish Prime Minister, to take "strong and bold measures for the Basque country". Before winning the election, he pledged: "What I am working towards is to finish off terrorism and Eta is not going to get a minute's rest."

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