

Old guard urges end to ETA terror: Jailed leader admits defeat in armed struggle

By Giles Tremlett. The Guardian. November 3, 2004.

Six senior members of the Basque separatist group Eta, who represent the old guard, have called on the organisation from their prison cells to lay down its arms, it was reported yesterday.

The call from Eta's former leader Francisco Mugica, alias Pakito, and five other veterans is contained in a letter addressed to Eta's leadership that was leaked to the *Diario de Noticias* newspaper in Pamplona, northern Spain, yesterday. In it, the authors recognise that Eta's campaign is failing to bring the Basque country closer to independence.

"Never in the history of this organisation have we been in such a poor state," they said. "Our political-military strategy has been overcome by our enemy's repression."

Unlike other veteran Eta members who have occasionally made public or private calls for an end to the violence, the letter writers made no moral arguments for stopping the bloodshed.

Instead their letter recognised that Eta had been crippled to the point of uselessness by the hundreds of arrests by French and Spanish police in recent years. "It is not a question of fixing the rear-view mirror or a burst tyre. It is the motor that does not work," the authors said.

The relatively low-level violence Eta was now capable of would not help it achieve anything, they warned.

"The armed fight being carried out today is of no use. This is a slow death. You cannot carry out an armed campaign on the basis of communiqués and threats which are then not carried out," they said.

It was the closest Eta members have come to recognising that, after more than 30 years in which it has killed more than 800 people, the group is facing defeat.

Mugica was considered to be Eta's senior leader in the late 1980s and early 90s, one of the group's most violent periods.

He was arrested in 1992 and is now one of nearly 700 Eta members being held in jails in Spain and France.

He and his fellow veterans reminded Eta members that "a military-political strategy was designed based on the firepower capacity of armed resistance. Without this component, the parameters change and . . . this reality must be taken into account."

If Eta's new strategy did not recognise its operational weakness on the ground, then "we will continue making mistakes time and time again," the veterans said.

They suggested, instead, that Eta try to use the support for separatism shown by Basques, who have traditionally given about 10% of the local vote to political parties that back the group's separatist aims.

"Our capital and political potential is still there, let's exploit all its possibilities: the institutional

fight and the fight of the masses," they said.

Eta has not killed for almost 18 months, and last month saw its latest leader, Mikel Antza, and a dozen alleged members rounded up by police in south-west France. They uncovered half-a-dozen arms dumps and found an arsenal that included ground-to-air missiles.

The letter was written in August, and will be even more pertinent today, according to some analysts.

But there were warnings yesterday that Mugica and his colleagues may no longer have any sway over the increasingly young Eta members who are believed to run what is left of the group.

"In Eta, old guys fade away quickly," Teo Uriarte, a former member who now opposes Basque nationalism, told the Associated Press.

Others warned that Eta's new leaders would now feel they had to prove that the group could still kill. "If its weakness is being highlighted, it may try to show its hardest face," said Francisco Jose Alcaraz of the Terrorism Victims' Association.

Arnaldo Otegi, former leader of the now-banned Batasuna separatist party, claimed the letter had been leaked to give a false impression of what Eta prisoners thought.

He invited Spanish journalists to go to the country's jails and ask Eta's prisoners "what they really think".

It was revealed yesterday that Spanish police had arrested another five suspected Eta members in and around the northern city of Bilbao.