

France and Spain debut new terror teams

BY: ELIZABETH BRYANT, United Press International. September 20, 2004.

New plans by France and Spain to establish a joint, cross-border police and judicial corps against terrorism and financing may pave the way for a pan-European response against a phenomenon that has no respect for boundaries, some experts say.

Announced late last week during a summit in Barcelona, the bilateral initiative particularly targets the Basque militant group ETA, and Islamist extremists who have jumped to the forefront of anti-terrorist barometers since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States.

So far, there are few details and many questions about the teams, described by Spanish Justice Minister Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar as a "joint Spanish-French inquiry corps."

The French Justice Ministry said Monday the teams were technically operational as of Sept. 10, though their formation was not announced until last Thursday.

Still unclear, however, is just how much leeway French and Spanish police and magistrates will have in conducting cross-border stings, wiretaps and other operations, and how national laws will be reconciled with this new, transnational initiative.

The exact size and content of the corps of police and magistrates is another unknown.

The new initiative responds to growing calls for closer anti-terrorism and policing efforts among the 25-member European Union, and coincides with a new report calling for greater European investment in security.

Daniel Keohane, a security expert at the London-based Center for European Reform, called French-Spanish announcement "very interesting," noting it marked a stark break from a history of largely procedural cooperation in fighting terrorism among EU countries.

"At the moment, the terrorists have the advantage," Keohane said. "Because they can move so easily and the police cannot. This is a good way to get around that problem, and make it easier to connect the dots in gathering evidence, in gathering intelligence, when these groups move across borders."

Anti-terrorism cooperation between France and Spain is not new. Joint efforts to crack down on ETA, in particular, have led to a slew of arrests of Basque terrorist suspects in recent years. Many experts believe the group – blamed for the deaths of some 800 people over its 36-year campaign to establish an independent country in northern Spain and southern France -- is now seriously weakened.

Nor is this the first time the two countries have announced plans for police forces to operate in each other's countries. A groundbreaking agreement signed last year between French President Jacques Chirac and then Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar envisioned the creation of joint police units to tackle largely ETA-related terrorism, along with drug trafficking in both countries.

"In fact, this represents continuity since 1984," when France and Spain first began working closely in fighting ETA, said Jean Francois Daguzin, a terrorism expert at the Foundation for Strategic Research, a Paris-based think tank.

But Islamic extremism, capped by the March 11 attacks on Madrid, have brought new urgency in joint policing efforts, Daguzin said.

"Until recently, the Spanish considered Islamic terrorism as secondary" to that authored by ETA, he said. "But in the Madrid attacks, we had information Spain could have profited from -- and vice versa."

Indeed, officials in Paris feared France would be the next target for Islamist extremists, following the Madrid train bombings.

In May, for example, the French newspaper Le Parisien, received a letter from a previously unknown group threatening to stage horrific attacks in France, for the country's allegedly anti-Muslim stance.

"Europe is a new war zone for the Jihad," wrote the group, which called itself the "Servants of Allah the Mighty and the Wise." "Know that our fight has only just begun."

Following the 2001 attacks on the United States, European police staged a series of arrests of suspected terrorists linked to al-Qaida, some of them implicated in the attacks.

But there as well, efforts to crack down on terrorism have been frustrated by lack of trans-border cooperation.

A case in point, said Keohane of the Center for European Reform, was that of a planned attack against the U.S. Embassy in Paris a few years ago.

"The Dutch police had information that would have been very useful to the French, but they didn't realize it until a long time after the fact," Keohane said. "The police weren't talking to each other, so they couldn't help each other."

What police cooperation does exist in Europe is often ad-hoc, and largely dependent on personal relations between individual officers, rather than any systematic policy, he said.

Last week, an independent commission called on the EU to beef up its capacity to respond to threats at home and overseas, the International Herald Tribune reported. The report not only discussed policing issues, but also dealt with European military capacity, and other security matters.

Still, the new French-Spanish corps fits into a larger European trend to establish a common approach to defense and security matters, ranging from a common European defense, to a new, Europe-wide defense warrant.

A separate initiative, also announced last week, aims to create a common gendarmerie force working in France, Portugal, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands.

French counterterrorist experts also work closely with their British counterparts, though they do not have a formal agreement to do so, as with Spain, said Daguzin the French terrorism expert.

Washington is also planning on beefing up security cooperation with the EU by sending a senior official to Brussels, the Financial Times reported Monday.

Eventually, some analyst predict, anti-terrorism efforts among small groups of European nations might track the path of Schengen -- an agreement originally cobbled by a handful of EU members that has blossomed into "border-free" travel across much of the continent.

"I could see this being a Europe-wide initiative in time," said Keohane, of the European center. "But for now, I think other countries will wait and see just exactly what the French and Spanish have in mind -- see how it works in practice, and take it from there."