

Aznar stands by his claim of Eta link to bombings

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By LESLIE CRAWFORD

Jose Maria Aznar, Spain's former prime minister, accused the Socialist government yesterday of failing to investigate suspected links between Islamic terrorists and Basque separatists.

At a parliamentary inquiry into the March 11 Madrid train bombings, Mr Aznar, who has officially retired from politics, made an impassioned defence of his government's handling of Spain's bloodiest terrorist attack. He said he had told the truth at all times.

The former prime minister denied he had sought to win political advantage for his Popular party, which faced a general election three days after the attacks, by blaming the massacre on Eta, the Basque separatist group.

The Popular party lost the March 14 election when an Islamic terrorist group claimed responsibility for the bombings, which killed 191 and injured thousands.

The massacre mobilised millions of Socialist voters who opposed Mr Aznar's support for the US invasion of Iraq and blamed him for exposing Spain to Islamist retribution.

Mr Aznar's first appearance at the public inquiry attracted unprecedented media attention and emboldened some members of parliament to act as if the former premier were on trial.

"You committed a grave mistake by blaming Eta," Joan Puig Cercos, the leader of Esquerra Republicana, a Catalan nationalist party, told Mr Aznar. "You sought an electoral victory at any price and instead you led the Popular party to defeat. You sought culprits where there were none. You blamed Eta but, unfortunately for you, it was not Eta. When will you apologise for lying to the Spanish people?"

An unrepentant Mr Aznar said the absence of any suicide bomber was a big factor in initially ruling out Islamist terrorists. "Six hours after the attacks we blamed Eta because that was the opinion of all our security and intelligence agencies," he said.

Taking the offensive, Mr Aznar urged the Socialist government to investigate "the incontestable fact" of relations between Islamist terrorists and Basque

separatists. However, he gave few details of the alleged links beyond reported contacts between Muslims and Eta prisoners in Spanish jails.

"All terrorist groups are the same and end up having links between them," Mr Aznar said, conflicting with former security and police chiefs who earlier told the inquiry there was no hard evidence linking Eta and al-Qaeda, the terrorist network.

Mr Aznar, who is now a guest lecturer at Georgetown University in Washington and remains the torch-bearer for US neoconservatives in Europe, also criticised the government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero for antagonising the US government - "our main ally in the global war against terrorism", according to Mr Aznar.

Mr Zapatero, who led the Socialist party to victory after the bombings, is due to testify before the committee on December 13.

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