

## Aznar asserts ties between Eta and Islamists over Madrid terror attack

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Giles Tremlett in Madrid

The former Spanish prime minister Jose Maria Aznar gave his implicit backing yesterday to a conspiracy theory winning support on Spain's political right, which claims that the Basque terrorist group Eta was involved in the train bombings in Madrid which killed 191 people.

"There is absolute proof that shows . . . a connection between Eta terrorists and Islamic terrorism," he said during an eleven-hour appearance before a parliamentary investigation, in which he was challenged over his government's handling of the bombings last March.

"I ask that all this connection be investigated without reservations and the results of this investigation be made public," he said. "What is strange to me is that there is no will to investigate it. I am one of those who believe that all (forms of) terrorism end up being connected."

Mr Aznar's conservative People's party lost an election three days after the attacks partly because voters mistrusted his government's initial insistence that Eta, rather than Islamists, was to blame.

Videotapes made by a group of armed Islamists who blew themselves up when surrounded by police, a few weeks later in a Madrid dormitory town have since shown that they and other Islamist radicals carried out the attacks with a dozen bombs planted on four commuter trains.

Few independent experts give credence to the conspiracy theory despite a growing insistence in some circles that certain coincidences cannot be explained by luck. These coincidences include contacts between Eta members and Islamists in Spanish jails as well as the fact that the bombers and Eta chose the same day to move large quantities of explosives towards Madrid.

Police investigators have said that no Eta connection to the attacks has been proven.

Mr Aznar denied allegations that his government either lied or tried to cover-up the truth about the Islamist authorship of the attacks. "My conscience is clear . . . we told the truth about what we knew," he said. "The judgment of the police was that there was more than enough background and recent precedent to think that it was (Eta) that committed the attacks."

The former prime minister also denied that the attacks had anything to do with his support for President George Bush and the war in Iraq. "These attacks were being prepared long before the Iraq war. They were not the result of the Iraq war even though many people said so," he said.

The attacks had been planned in order to change the results of elections that his party had been expected to win, he said. "They sought to overturn the electoral situation in Spain," Mr Aznar said.

"Your government lied and for this reason on March 14 there was an electoral surprise. That's all there is to it," one parliamentary commission member, Joan Puig of the Republican Left of Catalonia, said.

The Socialist party, through organisation secretary Jose Blanco, accused Mr Aznar of presenting himself "as a victim of a universal plot including terrorists, political parties, journalists and all the citizens who did not vote for the People's party."

Small groups of demonstrators gathered in the street leading up to the parliament building in Madrid yesterday, with some waving Spanish flags and shouting "Aznar, you will always be my president!"

A separate group that said it represented relatives of those killed and maimed by the bombings held up hands painted in red and shouted: "Aznar is responsible!"

Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, the prime minister, is due to testify on December 13.

Sixteen people, mostly of Moroccan origin, have been jailed on provisional charges of mass murder or terrorism in connection with the bombings.