

Bailed Batasuna leader blasts government stance

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Arnaldo Otegi, the leader of the outlawed Batasuna party who was recently jailed for allegedly forming part of terrorist group ETA, told reporters on Sunday that an end to the conflict in the Basque Country will not be reached unless the government drops its hard-line stance.

"A sincere attempt for peace is not compatible with a repressive policy to satisfy the fascist Spaniards," Otegi said during his first press conference after leaving prison on Friday on bail. "Mr. Zapatero, you cannot combine on the same path a solution to the conflict with the strategy of the descendants of those who shot your grandfather," he continued, referring to the death of the prime minister's grandfather at the hands of Francisco Franco's forces in 1936.

High Court judge Fernando Grande-Marlaska imprisoned Otegi last Wednesday under Spain's counterterrorism laws. The arrest took place as the Parliament approved a motion to negotiate with ETA if it agrees to disarm, although the opposition Popular Party (PP) has rejected talks with the terrorist group. And despite claims to the contrary, the government repeated yesterday that so far there have been no official contacts with ETA.

On Friday, Otegi said that judicial action against him would not change his stance in favor of finding a peaceful solution to the Basque conflict. At a party meeting in November, Otegi called for negotiations between Batasuna, ETA and the government.

ETA detonated several small bombs in the Basque Country and Madrid in the last week, injuring about 50 people. The group has not killed anyone since May 2003, but has murdered about 850 since it began its campaign of violence in 1968.

Many observers have commented that ETA is now weaker than ever before, and Otegi's support for negotiations proves that it sees the political route as its last option.

"Never before in the history of this organization have we been in such a bad place... completely vulnerable to repression and without the capacity to react," wrote a group of six ETA leaders from their prison cells in a letter leaked to the press last November. The prisoners called for the current ETA leadership to disarm and to put its efforts into political negotiation.