

Jailed ETA activists call for end to armed struggle

By Mark Mulligan. Financial Times. November 3, 2004.

Further signs that Eta, the outlawed Basque separatist group, has been forced to rethink its hardline terror campaign emerged yesterday with the publication of a letter from jailed activists calling on leaders to lay down their arms.

The letter, published in part in a regional newspaper, appears to confirm that Eta's 36-year armed fight for an independent Basque state has lost momentum, claiming that the organisation has never been in such a "bad state".

It follows the arrest a month ago of Mikel Albizu, one of the group's most elusive leaders, in a farmhouse near the French-Spanish border. A further 20 suspects were detained in the raid.

French and Spanish police have arrested hundreds of Eta activists in the past three years, seriously weakening the guerrilla group. Analysts say the movement is also finding it increasingly difficult to recruit members.

Eta's last fatal attack was in May last year, when two civil guards were killed by a limpet bomb placed under their patrol car.

Since then, police have thwarted at least three attacks, including a plan to detonate half a tonne of explosives in Madrid shortly before the general election in March this year.

That attack had been designed as a protest against last year's outlawing of Batasuna, Eta's main political arm.

The emergence of al-Qaeda cells in Spain, demonstrated in the March 11 attacks in Madrid that killed 200 and injured 1,400, has also worked against the Eta cause, say some commentators.

"After the terrible March 11 massacre, anything that Eta does will look feeble," said Kepa Aulestia, a former Eta militant who now advocates a political solution to the conflict.

In the letter - published yesterday but dated August - six former activists call on the Eta leadership to give up the terror campaign. They appeal for a switch in strategy, to an "institutional" campaign for the "masses", working with leftwing nationalist parties in the Basque country.

"The armed struggle being carried out these days has no purpose," it says.

"Never in the history of the organisation has (Eta) been in such bad shape."

Basque government leaders took some heart from the development, but called for political groups linked to Eta to reinforce the message to militants.

However, Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar, the Spanish justice minister, warned against complacency. "There's no room to lower the guard even for a second," he said.