

Bombings in Spain Are Seen as a Sign of Basque Group's Decline, Not Strength

New York Times. December 20, 2004.

By RENWICK McLEAN

MADRID, Dec. 19 - The series of bombings in Spanish cities this month by the Basque militant group ETA reflects a major shift in the trajectory of an organization that has terrorized Spanish society for more than 30 years, Spanish government officials say.

Rather than signaling newfound strength, they say, the bombings indicate desperation from a group that is slipping into its death throes.

"ETA is in its terminal phase," said Fernando Reinares, the senior antiterrorism adviser at the Interior Ministry. "We know that terminal phases often produce rivalries and fragmentation that can lead to spectacular attacks."

There is widespread agreement in the central government in Madrid and in the regional government in the Basque country that ETA is closer to extinction than at any point in its history, and that the main question now is when and how peace will come about, rather than if it will.

Gorka Kn?rr, vice president of the Basque Parliament and a supporter of Basque independence, said he thought that the core of ETA's leadership had already decided to abandon violence.

"I don't think a fatal attack is foreseeable right now," unless it is carried out by renegade elements, Mr. Kn?rr said.

A dozen bombs have exploded in eight Spanish cities this month, causing slight injuries to several people and some minor property damage. Telephone calls made in the name of ETA warned of the bombs before they exploded, suggesting they were not intended to inflict heavy casualties.

Mr. Kn?rr said the current string of bombings was an effort not to kill but to send a message that the organization is still alive and relevant.

Mr. Kn?rr and Mr. Reinares both cautioned, however, that ETA still posed a serious threat, and emphasized that it was too early to declare the group finished.

In Vitoria, home to the Basque regional government, 60 percent of the

politicians have bodyguards. Journalists, police officers, members of the military, human rights activists and many others live under constant threat of attack from the group.

"There are people within ETA who are interested in opposing the peace process," Mr. Kn?rr said. With hundreds of ETA militants, he added, "it's hard to stop everything right away."

ETA stands for the Basque phrase Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or Basque Homeland and Liberty. The group, which seeks to establish an independent Basque state encompassing sections of northern Spain and southern France, has killed more than 800 people, including nearly 350 civilians, since 1968. Its last killing was in May 2003.

Claims of ETA's demise have been made before, particularly in 1992, when many of its leading figures were arrested in Bidart, France.

But the group was soon killing again; it took 14 lives the following year.

"It is easy to rebuild a world of terrorism," said Jorge Ibarrondo, a city planner in Vitoria, and who has been threatened by ETA. "Destroying things is easy."

The group's history of recovering from setbacks makes the categorical statements by current officials all the more striking. Those officials say a number of factors gives them confidence that this time the group is in serious trouble.

For one thing, in October a police raid in France devastated the organization's leadership ranks. The 20 arrests made during the raid have left the group with mostly support players and operatives who lack the strategic vision necessary to carry the group forward, according to Spanish officials.

"ETA is headless," Mr. Reinares said.

With France willing to take a firmer stand against ETA, Spanish officials say, the group will have real difficulty getting back on its feet. For decades, ETA found safe refuge from the Spanish police by crossing the Pyrenees into French territory, Spanish officials contend. But since 2000, a particularly violent year in which ETA killed 23 people, France has stepped up the pressure on the group, according to those officials.

The terror attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, and then in Madrid on March 11 this year, when train bombings killed 191 people and wounded 1,800, provided added incentive for international cooperation.

After the attacks, "France and Europe decided that they couldn't allow a terrorist threat to exist within their borders," said Josu I?aki Erkoreka, a

member of the Spanish Parliament who represents the Basque Nationalist Party, which advocates greater autonomy for the Basque country.

Meanwhile, as antiterrorism assistance has poured in from abroad, Spain has begun to reap the benefits of a highly successful effort to infiltrate ETA that was started six or seven years ago, Spanish officials say.

In addition to allowing the police to snuff out attacks, intercept deliveries of explosives and make arrests, the infiltration effort has had a psychological impact on ETA, the officials say.

"It has created tremendous internal distrust, because they don't know who is an informant and who isn't," Mr. Knorr said.

Another factor weighing on ETA, specialists contend, is the deep scar left on society by the March 11 Madrid train bombings. "After March 11, any fatal attack can count on provoking more rejection than ever," Mr. Knorr said.

It is possible that ETA is reconsidering the effectiveness of terrorism as a tactic in light of the train attacks, some officials argue. There is also evidence that members of the group's old guard have come to the conclusion that politics is the only way for the organization to make real progress toward its goals.

In August, six jailed members of ETA, including its former paramount leader, Francisco Murguía Garmendia, sent a letter from prison to the group's current leaders urging them to abandon violence for politics.

"This armed fight that we are carrying out these days is not working," said the letter, which was published by the newspaper *Diario de Noticias* in Navarra. "Our political potential and capital is there, and we must exploit it in all its facets."

Government officials say that a crucial part of their strategy for defeating ETA has been to draw local support away from the group by making politics a viable avenue for Basque requests for greater autonomy.

One of the clearest signs that the group is in turmoil, specialists say, is the growing percentage of Basque civilians among its targets. Early on, ETA killed more police officers and members of the military than civilians.

But in the past 10 years, 70 percent of victims have been civilians, and most have been Basques, according to the Interior Ministry.

"You know a group is in trouble when it turns on its own people," Mr. Reinares said.

Despite signs that ETA may be falling apart, the group is very much alive for people living directly in its shadow.

Mr. Ibarrodo, the Vitoria city planner, has had two bodyguards with him every day since he entered politics five years ago as a member of the Popular Party, which ETA considers an enemy. Since then, he said, he has been unable to take his children to the park, sit with his back to the door at a restaurant, or close his eyes to pray at church, because the threat of ETA is always there.

The terror affects everyone, not just people directly threatened by ETA, Mr. Ibarrodo said.

"You cannot say what you think in a bar because you never know who is around you," he said, alluding to ETA informants who, he said, make lists of residents they consider to be opponents of the group. "Until the true strategists, the ones who are in jail and who inspire the group, until they say 'We are sorry and we renounce violence,' " he said, "we won't think ETA is dead."

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