

Attacked from the right

MADRID

Protesters rough up Spain's macho defence minister

SPAIN'S defence minister, José Bono, likes to wrap himself in the national flag. He is less used to being struck by one, as he was at a protest last weekend staged by the Association of Victims of Terrorism in Madrid. The 35,000-strong rally was called to commemorate all victims of terrorism, including those killed in the March 11th Madrid train bombings. But the protesters' bigger target was the Basque terrorist group, ETA. And the attack on Mr Bono was the work of right-wing thugs.

What Mr Bono, a devout Catholic and patriot who prides himself on being a *macho ibérico*, received seems to have been a "gay-bashing", provoked by the government's promotion of gay rights. "Hate-filled women" in fur coats punched him; others called him an "assassin" and a "defender of poofers". He and another Socialist politician fled, after a man wielding an iron bar joined the attack. The police questioned two members of an opposition People's Party (PP) committee, one of whom was photographed clasping a broken flagpole. ▶▶

▶ That the macho Mr Bono, of all Socialists, should be attacked shows both how few brains the mob had and how edgy some on the right now are. As a spokeswoman for the March 11th Victims Association, Pilar Manjón, who did not attend the rally, said, "it seemed like those people were the same ones who told me that they would 'stick my dead up my arse'." Another target of verbal abuse was Gregorio Peces-Barba, a Socialist recently appointed as ombudsman of all victims' groups. He called on both main parties to stop making political capital out of victims.

Neo-fascist skinheads were notably absent from the rally. A PP spokesman roundly condemned the attacks, which were started by middle-aged right-wingers. The old nationalist chant, "United, Spain will not be defeated", was directed at the Socialist government, whose opposition to the Basques' plan for a referen-

dum on becoming a free state is deemed too soft. Fears are also stirring on the right since the government said it might talk to ETA if it laid down its weapons for good.

Above all, the attacks point up how angry right-wingers are over the government's raft of social reforms. They also testify to a refusal to come to terms with the PP's defeat last March. Many believe the election was stolen only by the aftermath of the March 11th bombings.

Yet most Spaniards still back the Socialists. The latest polls put the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero eight points ahead of the PP. And one poll shows a seven-point rise in the popularity of the PP leader, Mariano Rajoy, after he resisted a more antagonistic path and made a pact with Mr Zapatero to present a joint response to the Basques. Less rabble-rousing and more deliberation are surely the best route for the PP to take. ■