

Gone fishing

More high-level captures point to a systematic weakening of ETA.



The bad guy is in the middle

ANOTHER big fish from the violent Basque separatist group, ETA, was caught this week. On February 28th Ibon Gogekoetxea, ETA's military boss, was arrested at a country cottage in Normandy, in north-west France. Two of ETA's experienced assassins, José Ayestaran and Beinat Aginagalde, were taken with him.

The arrests offer further proof of ETA's decline. Mr Gogekoetxea, who once tried to kill King Juan Carlos, is the fifth military chief to be captured in just two years. He was in charge for only ten months. Mr Ayestaran and Mr Aginagalde were apparently preparing a kidnapping and bombing campaign in Spain. Several remote-controlled bombs were found. This is the third time in recent weeks that the police have foiled attempts to send ETA terrorists into Spain.

ETA is being slowly asphyxiated by Europe's police. Its Normandy cottage was a long way not just from Spain, but from its traditional base in south-west France. Police pressure in France is so strong that ETA has tried setting up in Portugal. But Portuguese police raided a safe house in Obidos, north of Lisbon, in early February.

The group may be faring better in Latin America, says a Spanish judge, Eloy Velasco. On March 1st he issued arrest warrants for seven members of Colombia's FARC guerrilla group, and six ETA militants, whom he claimed had worked together using Venezuelan territory. He also accused Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, of facilitating contacts between the two groups. Predictably enough, Mr Chávez dismissed the allegations as part of an American-led campaign against him.

ETA's decline is reflected both in falling recruitment and in a lower rate of killing. In 2000-01, after it had used a ceasefire to rearm and reorganise, it killed 38 people in bomb and pistol attacks. Since then it has claimed only 19 victims, including three policemen in 2009.

The biggest recent blow to ETA came from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. In June 2009 it upheld a Spanish ban on two of ETA's political front parties, Herri Batasuna and Batasuna. The decision killed ETA's hopes of operating as both a terrorist group and a political party. The front parties used to win over 10% of the Basque vote, giving them control of some town halls and, occasionally, the balance of power in the Basque region's parliament. The ban has changed this. Last March control of the regional government passed from the Basque Nationalist Party, often seen as soft on ETA, to the Socialists for the first time in almost 30 years. Basque police are now cracking down on all forms of public support for ETA.

There are signs of a shift in power within ETA. A senior Batasuna leader, Rufino Etxeberria, has acknowledged that there can be no peace process without ETA laying down its arms. Optimists see this as a bid to tell the men with guns what to do. Pessimists, including senior members of the Socialist government in Madrid, reckon it is purely cosmetic. The failed talks during a 2006 ceasefire, they think, demonstrated that Batasuna has no real power and that ETA pulls all the strings.

Mr Etxeberria and others want talks modelled on the successful Northern Ireland peace process, which would include a complete ETA ceasefire. Sinn Fein's leader, Gerry Adams, sees a unique opportunity in the Basque country. There is an onus on everyone to grasp it in good faith and to make every effort to bring an end to conflict, he wrote in the Guardian, a British newspaper, on February 27th.

Can the new promoters of peace impose themselves on the gunmen? The test will come only if and when ETA kills again. If Batasuna breaks with the past and condemns any such killing, and goes on to denounce other attacks, it will show that ETA has lost control of its own people. Peace, in that case, would be far closer.

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