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Spain's ETA unlikely to heed IRA example

By Gideon Long

MADRID, Sept 30 (Reuters) - The IRA's decision to scrap its weapons will put psychological pressure on ETA to call a truce with Spain but is unlikely to draw meaningful concessions from the armed Basque separatist group, analysts said.

"The Basque nationalists have always looked at Northern Ireland out of the corner of their eye and this week's IRA announcement is bound to have some impact," British analyst Jonathan Power said.

"It must weaken ETA's self-confidence," said Power, an associate of the independent thinktank Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research (TFF).

In what London and Dublin hailed as a landmark announcement, an international monitoring group said on Monday the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had scrapped its entire arsenal, including rifles, explosives, machine guns and surface-to-air missiles.

The move leaves ETA and Northern Ireland's "loyalist" paramilitaries as the only armed guerrilla groups in Western Europe. The loyalists want to keep the province part of Britain while the IRA has fought for a united Ireland.

"Psychologically, it is undoubtedly important for ETA," said Gorka Knorr, a former member of the Basque parliament from the moderate nationalist party Eusko Alkartasuna.

"This week's announcement, previous IRA statements -- even the revulsion in Spain caused by the al Qaeda train bombings last year. It all heaps pressure on ETA and points in the same direction -- towards an end to violence."

The day after the news from Belfast, ETA issued a statement in which it recognised "new opportunities" in the political situation but saw "new risks" too.

It also set off a bomb -- its second in four days -- prompting many to conclude nothing had changed.

"There will be those who look for parallels between the Irish and the Spanish situation when there aren't any," El Mundo newspaper said in a gloomy editorial this week.

"While the IRA declared a ceasefire in 1997, then renounced its armed struggle and has now handed in its weapons, in Spain ETA keeps planting bombs."

Nevertheless, ETA did declare a truce in 1998, in a move that left little doubt it was following the example of the IRA in seeking a negotiated peace. The truce lasted 15 months.

In past decades, there have been recurring reports of cooperation between the two groups.

ETA was reported to have received IRA weapons training in the 1980s and an Argentine newspaper said in 1998 that the IRA and ETA had held secret talks in Uruguay on the chances of forging a peace agreement in Spain.

ETA's 1998 ceasefire announcement followed intensified secret contacts between its Basque political allies and Sinn Fein, the IRA's political ally, reports at the time said.

ETA, classed as a terrorist group by Spain, the European Union and the United States, has killed nearly 850 people since 1968 in a bombing and shooting campaign for an independent Basque state in northern Spain and southwestern France.

Spain's Socialist government fuelled speculation there might be a breakthrough in the long-running conflict in May with an unprecedented offer to talk to ETA if it stopped violence.

ETA's response was confusing. In June, the group called for a peace process and said it would stop attacking elected Spanish politicians.

A month later, it said it would still target members of the Spanish government. It continues to plant bombs although no one has been killed in an ETA attack for more than two years.

"If ETA takes a decisive step forward, democracy will do what is necessary," Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero told parliament this week.

"If ETA has the will to give up violence, we can enter a period in which we consolidate peace," he said.

Analysts say ETA and its political ally Batasuna want a statement from Madrid similar to the one London made in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, when it accepted the right of the people of Northern Ireland to determine their own future.

"What's lacking is a declaration from Madrid like the one made by Downing Street," Knorr said. "That will be a difficult statement for Madrid to make."

Pedro Ibarra, professor of political science at the University of the Basque Country in Bilbao, doubted Monday's announcement in Belfast would prompt a radical rethink from ETA.

"The dividend from the Irish peace process has already been felt in the Basque country," he said. "Unfortunately, I don't think it can help any more than it already has."

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