

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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Spain: The lethal cost of freedom of expression in the Basque Country

Amnesty International today called on the Basque armed group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) to renounce once and for all its attempts to stifle freedom of expression in the Basque Country with shootings, bombings and campaigns of intimidation. The call comes after the fatal, pre-electoral shooting, on Saturday, of a Socialist Party activist, which has been attributed to ETA.

Joseba Pagazaurtundua was a dedicated member of the Basque Socialist Party (Partido Socialista de Euskadi, EE) and a member and organizer of the "Basta Ya" movement, which vigorously opposes ETA violence. He was a former member of a wing of ETA known as ETA Politico-Militar, which dissolved itself in the 1970s. At the time of his death he was on sick leave from his post as commander of the Municipal Police of Andouin (Guipúzcoa) following persistent death threats.

The shooting of Joseba Pagazaurtundua comes less than a month before the opening of the municipal elections campaign. He was killed in the same city (Andoain) as the journalist and peace activist José Luis López de Lacalle, who was shot dead by ETA in May 2000. Several city councillors have left the city in recent years after receiving death threats.

"If indeed ETA is responsible for this killing, it can only be seen as an attempt to intimidate those who articulate views different from, or opposed to, its own policies and actions," Amnesty International stated.

At the end of September 2002, ETA announced that offices and organized meetings of the ruling centre-right Popular Party (Partido Popular, PP) and Socialist Party (PSOE) would be viewed as "military targets", and threatened the lives of party activists. The statement followed an earlier declaration, in August, that it would "take measures" against political parties which voted for, or did not vote against, the new Law on Political Parties. This law -- which declares political parties that fail to respect democratic or constitutional values to be illegal -- was widely seen as a step in the campaign to outlaw the political grouping Batasuna.

Amnesty International has consistently and unreservedly condemned the human rights abuses committed by ETA.

"The deliberate killing of political party members or political activists, and the attempt to intimidate them by acts of violence is an attack on the most fundamental of human rights - the right to life and the rights to freedom of assembly and expression," Amnesty International said.

"Such killings and death threats can never be justified."

Background

ETA killed five people last year, and injured many more.

Batasuna is a parliamentary coalition of political parties widely regarded as the political expression of ETA. Amnesty International expressed concern about certain aspects of the Law on Parties in May 2002, on the grounds that the ambiguity of some wording in the law could lead to the outlawing of parties with similar political goals to those of armed groups, but which did not advocate or use violence.

In September 2002, Amnesty International called on the Spanish and Basque authorities to ensure that fundamental rights to freedom of expression in the Basque Country were not undermined by moves connected with the suspension and outlawing of Batasuna.

Public Document

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