

Madrid Bombing 2004

In the early morning of March 11, 2004, 191 people were killed and another 1,430 wounded on commuter trains in Madrid in what was Europe's worst act of terror since the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 270. The blasts came just three days before Spain's general election. The management of this crisis was studied by María Julia Sáenz.

Spain's Prime Minister José María Aznar had actively assisted in the U.S.'s "war on terror", including the dispatch of troops to Iraq. His meeting in the Azores Islands with President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair just prior to the start of the war in Iraq went against popular opinion in Spain. Spanish citizens demonstrated their opposition to the war and the alliance of Spain's ruling party, Partido Popular, with U.S. foreign policy in Iraq.

Spain has had a long history of Basque terrorism, so Spaniards understand violence against civilians better than many other Europeans. Prime Minister Aznar had waged a determined campaign against the ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna, a Basque separatist terrorist organization), increasing police and intelligence agents presence in the Basque regions and lobbying other European leaders to crack down on ETA members in exile.

Immediately after the attacks in Madrid, Prime Minister Aznar and government officials blamed the ETA. However, opposition parties (including Batasuna which has been declared illegal by UN and is considered the political voice of ETA) and international media developed different thesis connecting the attacks with Islamic terrorist organizations. Insurmountable evidence gathered later proved that an Islamic group possibly connected to al-Qaeda was indeed



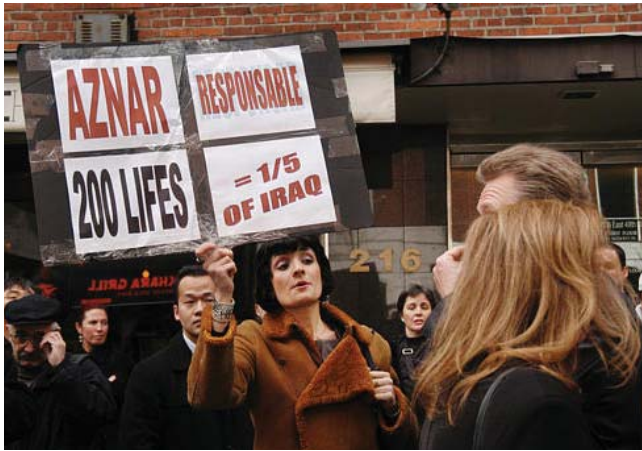
Rescue workers line up bodies beside a bomb damaged passenger train at Atocha station following a number of explosions on trains in Madrid Thursday March 11, 2004, just three days before Spain's general elections, killing more than 170 rush-hour commuters and wounding more than 500 in Spain's worst terrorist attack ever. (AP Photo/Denis Doyle)

behind the bombings, and the poor management of information by the Spanish government resulted in the ruling party losing the elections on Sunday, March 14, 2004.

Decisions Affecting the Crisis

There were three major critical decisions during the crisis:

- When faced with the need to respond to the public and press about the crisis, based on their past experience and assumptions, the Government repeatedly stated that the ETA was responsible for the attacks. President Aznar called directors of principal newspapers, the Spanish Government instructed the Spanish mission to the UN to obtain a resolution officially assigning responsibility to the ETA, and the Minister of External Affairs instructed all diplomatic representatives of Spain worldwide to reply to media with this official blame. Even after evidence began to surface suggesting other possible perpetrators, the Government chose to hold fast to their original statement of blame.
- Confronted with the evidence found in the backpack that did not explode, the Government could identify on Saturday, March 13, three Moroccans and two Spaniards of Indian origin, connected to the forgery and sale of the cell phone cards that activated the bombs in the four trains. Furthermore, one of the arrested suspects was recognized by two survivors of the blast who said they saw him before



A protester holds a sign blaming Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar for the Madrid terrorist bombing after mourners observed a minute of silence outside the Cervantes Institute in New York Friday, March 12, 2004. Thursday's rush hour attack in Madrid killed 199 people. (AP Photo/Jennifer Szymazek)

the explosions took place. The Government decided to detain these five primary suspects, opening a new line of investigation connected to radical Islamic groups, without ruling out the line of investigation related to ETA. The announcement of the arrests came Saturday afternoon, just hours before polls were to open Sunday the 14th in general elections.

• On the evening of March 13, Telemadrid received a phone call about a video in which the responsibility of the attacks is claimed by al-Qaeda. Immediately thereafter the security forces of the Government found the video and made the translation from Arabic language. On Sunday the 14th (elections day), the Government, through Minister Acebes,

announced the discovery of the video in which a man with a Moroccan accent presented himself as a representative of al-Qaeda in Europe, claiming the authorship of the attacks. Minister Acebes said authorities could not confirm the claim was genuine. (The tape's authenticity was confirmed by Monday, March 15.)

Each of the stated decisions was closely determined by a decision-making unit that was responsible for framing the situation, making the decisions, and implementing them—or at least making sure that they were implemented. The consequences of each decision influenced the following sequence of events.

Relevant Lessons Derived from Case

- Government needs to explain international policy to its constituencies if it is to remain in power.
- Information management, as well as relationship with the media, should be conducted with transparency and openness. Political use of media can lead to unanticipated results.
- 11-M (as the crisis became known) was not an isolated event but the result of long-term strategy designed by al-Qaeda whose threat was underestimated by the Spanish Government.
- Terrorism is a global threat that requires prevention and anticipation through a global and collaborative strategy.
- Intelligence is the basis of any terrorism prevention strategy, and collaboration is required among police, military and civil society.



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