

Finding the bombers depends on forensic analysis of devices that caused carnage

A DIRECT denial by Basque terrorists that they carried out the Madrid train bombings last night shifted suspicion for the outrage towards al-Qa'ida.

The claim by Eta in a pro-Basque independence newspaper came as the death toll rose to at least 199, with 1,400 injured, during the co-ordinated attack on early morning commuter trains. An Eta spokesman was quoted as saying his organisation "has no responsibility whatsoever for the Madrid attacks".

But despite the denial José Maria Aznar, the Spanish Prime Minister, insisted that the separatist group was the prime suspect for the bombings, although he added that "no line of investigation will be ruled out".

The death toll is expected to exceed 200, with 59 of the injured being described as in a serious or critical condition. Of the dead there are 14 foreigners from 10 different countries, the youngest victim being a six-month-old baby. About 80 of the dead have yet to be identified.

Spanish forensic scientists began their analysis of the remains of the ten donated train bombs, as well as four devices that failed to explode.

A Spanish radio station reported that the bombs, which were hidden on four commuter trains in rucksacks, were set off on Thursday morning by mobile phones which had their alarms set for 7.39am. The unconfirmed report said the explosive devices contained copper detonators, which are not generally used by Eta, who favour aluminium. The backpacks contained 10kg (22lbs) of Spanish-made plastic explosives and about 1kg of screws and nails, which act as shrapnel to maim and kill. The detonator was also Spanish-made, according to the report.

The Spanish authorities said the dynamite used in the explo-

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sives is similar to that used by Eta in the past. The Basque group are known to hold stockpiles of dynamite. However, police are examining a stolen truck found east of the capital containing detonators and a tape in Arabic with verses from the Koran. Furthermore a group linked to al-Qa'ida has said it was responsible for the attack, although it has made false claims in the past.

If an Islamic extremist group, rather than a Spanish separatist one, is responsible then the worldwide implications are enormous. It would be the first such strike in the heart of Europe, and the first in the West since the 11 September attacks. The Madrid attack came 911 days after the atrocities in America. It would also raise the threat level to European nations such as Britain, Italy and Poland, which have aligned themselves with the US in the Iraq war.

Britain yesterday remained on a high security alert, but the police and intelligence agencies are waiting for further information about the identity of the bombers before deciding on whether to introduce any further defence measures.

Scotland Yard and MI5 believe the bulk of the evidence available points towards Eta being behind the Madrid atrocity. But Jürgen Storbeck, the director of Europol, which liaises between European police forces, yesterday questioned this belief. Speaking in Rome he said: "In the past Eta has always attacked individuals, and if they saw any danger for the public they gave a warning ... It's not yet clear they were the authors." Mr Storbeck's doubts about the Eta link are thought to be

shared by the American head of Interpol, Richard Noble.

Claude Moniquet, president of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre, backed the theory of jihadist involvement. "If this is Eta then it is (politically speaking) good for the Spanish government. If it was an Islamist attack it is very bad for the government. That is why that was their conclusion from the beginning and why it has been so difficult for them to move away from it."

He added that, if this was an attack by Islamic extremists, "it is a very disturbing signal: by attacking Spain, the terrorists did not target a weak link". He said: "This country is familiar with terrorism, the police and security services are well-trained and efficient, security measures are very real and had been strengthened in the approach to the [general] elections [on Sunday]."

But Rodrigo Rato, Spain's Deputy Prime Minister, said: "Our central thesis is that it was Eta, which already tried to carry out just such a massacre three times. That's the principal line of investigation, though we're not ruling out any others."

His views are given weight by a thwarted attack last Christmas Eve on a Madrid train station using bombs hidden in backpacks. Basque youths were arrested for that plot. And two weeks ago, Spanish authorities seized a van driven to Madrid by Eta militants with 500 kg (1,100lb) of explosives.

Otto Schily, Germany's Interior Minister, said the available evidence indicated that the Basque separatist group was behind the attack.

The possibility that Eta and al-Qa'ida have joined forces has been dismissed by most intelligence experts. The Islamic extremist group has never before co-operated with non-Muslims.