

Irish Examiner

Thursday, March 18, 2004 :

Madrid move heightens risk of further bombings

By Ann Cahill, Europe Correspondent

The announcement that Spain will pull its troops out of Iraq increases the likelihood of further attacks in Europe, according to the **European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre (ESISC)**. Countries with Moroccan communities and those with troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are at most risk, the centre says, following an assessment of the situation after last Thursday's bombings.

It is very critical of the Spanish government's insistence that ETA was involved in the blasts even when the security forces knew it could not be the Basque movement.

As a result of what it described as manipulation, other countries "neglected to raise their own security level within the first, often decisive, hours following the bombings and foreign services were unable to instigate inquiries on the possible international relations of the terrorists".

The bombings the first to hit a Western state on its own ground since September 11 represent a major strategic victory for the jihad movement. The Spanish announcement that they will withdraw their troops from Iraq can be portrayed as a real political success which will help recruit members and could encourage more attacks in the future, said the report.

The Moroccan jihadists believed to be responsible for Madrid have probably spread out in Europe since the bombing last May in Casablanca which killed 40 people when a Spanish target was hit. This, according to the report, is very worrying and could have resulted in Jihadist cells in Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands as well as in France where they could be activated to commit attacks in the countries where they live. It also warns that Morocco itself is in severe danger. "It is impossible to say when and where the jihadists will carry their next blow, but certain countries are more threatened, obviously, than others".

Those with troops in Afghanistan and Iraq are evident targets, such as Britain (which is a priority for the Jihadists), Bulgaria, Denmark, Spain (which continues to be under threat), the Netherlands, Italy, Poland, Ukraine Germany and Sweden.

France is also a target, despite not having troops in these countries. Belgium could be a target with the NATO and EU headquarters in the country.

The centre warns against Europe responding with what it calls political gadgets such as a European CIA, as it undermines the existing security arrangements that are working quite well. Security forces came together successfully in response to various danger warnings such as on transatlantic flights.

Existing police and security teams need to be strengthened with more technical support, personnel and funding.

"The best proof that the cooperation inter-services is really working is, obviously, the fact that, since September, 2001, hundreds of presumed terrorists were arrested in Europe, in the United States or somewhere else and that at least a dozen large-scale attacks were prevented, among others in London, Paris or Rome."

The narrow links between the Jihadists and certain Chechen terrorist organisations are expected to lead to fresh attacks on Moscow and Russian interests abroad. The United States, Australia, Japan and Thailand, all with troops in Iraq, are obvious targets, says the centre.