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Spain's Basques Attack Separatist Violence With Arts, Investment

By Anne Swardson

Washington Post Foreign Service

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The Washington Post

BILBAO, Spain—This city in the heart of Basque country, known around the world mostly for separatist terrorism, will take its place on the world stage in October for a nonviolent reason.

It is then that an American-designed art museum of the highest architectural order will open its doors here. Paid for entirely with local funds, the \$100 million structure is a symbol of Basque regional power and independence that its sponsors hope will attract visitors from all over Europe.

But it turns out that the museum and the terrorism are not unrelated. In a city that is home to half of Spain's Basques, the museum also is the cornerstone of a broad-based campaign against the violence that has cost nearly 800 lives in 30 years. It is a campaign focused not on police and guns, but on culture and investment.

Bilbao and all of the Basque country are undergoing a massive, \$1-billion-plus redevelopment designed to undercut the separatists by allowing mainstream Basque nationalist pride to flourish in the sunlight. Independence from Spain will hold less allure, the theory goes, if Basques govern their own fate -- and hold their own purse strings.

If the effort succeeds, it may offer lessons to other developed nations with angry ethnic minorities. If it fails, more people will die.

"We think culture will help combat the violence," said Bilbao Deputy Mayor Ibon Areso. "It's not the only goal of the museum, but it's important. More and more, the cultural and economic aspects are related. If we can raise

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the economic level, young people will be less attracted to violence."

Last week was fiesta week in Bilbao, and signs of the redevelopment were everywhere. Revelers could take the new subway -- modeled on Washington's Metro -- to the bullfights, walk across gleaming new pedestrian bridges to the outdoor concerts, look down the Bilbao River from the fireworks display and see the gleaming facades of the museum.

A new airport is under construction, and a neighboring high-tech business corridor is attracting foreign and Spanish companies. A convention center that will also house the local orchestra is rising from the shells of broken-down factories on the riverbanks and, farther along the river, a library and cultural center is being built. The entire port of Bilbao, on which the local economy once was based, is being moved downriver and offshore, at a cost of \$258 million.

The regional parliament just approved a sweeping plan for urban renewal designed to revitalize the decayed riverfront along its entire 10-mile length from Bilbao to the Atlantic, placing office, commercial and institutional space beside, and even in, the river. High-speed rail connections to Madrid and Paris are planned, as is a thorough cleaning of the foul-smelling river.

Such grand projects often founder on financing, and some of these may not come to pass. But the Basque country has both the political clout to extract money from Madrid and the European Union in Brussels and the autonomy to raise its own revenue. The intent of both Basque politicians and the government of Spain is clear -- to use development and prosperity to nourish nationalism in its most peaceful form and, in the process, to marginalize and weaken the violent separatist movement known by its Basque initials, ETA.

"There is a collective desire to transform the city of Bilbao," said Alfonso Vegara, director of the Madrid architectural and planning firm that created the regional plan. "The project has a high political and social meaning. If the Basque country can succeed with the project, they can find themselves again."

The jewel of the project is the museum. Designed by California architect Frank Gehry, its vaguely maritime,

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vaguely petaled shapes dominate the riverbank. Its gray titanium panels reflect the industrial history of the city: Its towering glass panels are open to the river view, and its limestone towers are made of local materials. More than 90 percent of the work was done by Basque companies.

Local and regional officials hope the museum will alter the image of this run-down industrial city and become a symbol of rebirth that will attract tourists and businesses and spur growth. It was built in collaboration with the New York-based Guggenheim Foundation, which will manage the museum and display some of its vast collection of 20th-century art there. It will also have a sizable component of Basque art. With much fiscal sacrifice, Basque governments are paying the entire price; the Spanish national government is not involved.

"They're reaching out with this building to the global society," Gehry said. "That's what this is all about. They could subsume themselves with the rest of Spain, but they choose not to."

The Basques, nestled in the rocky hills below the Pyrenees for 4,000 years, represent one of the oldest surviving cultures in Europe. Their homeland was divided between southwestern France and northern Spain in 1512, but the people preserved their language -- which has no known connections to any other -- against both French and Spanish.

Even as steel, shipbuilding and shipping blossomed here during the Industrial Revolution and after, kings and other rulers in Madrid revoked rights and powers the Basques felt should remain with them. During the reign of dictator Francisco Franco from 1938 to 1975, speaking Basque in public or studying it in school was forbidden.

In 1958, ETA was formed to fight such oppression; its first killing was carried out in 1968. Since then, it is estimated, about 800 people have died at the hands of ETA.

One of its most vicious assassinations came on July 10. On that day, ETA gunmen kidnapped Miguel Angel Blanco Garrido, 29, a town council member from the Basque village of Ermua. Blanco was a member of Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's center-right Popular Party.

ETA said it would kill Blanco unless some 500 Basque prisoners in jails around Spain were transferred to prisons

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in Basque country. They were not, and 48 hours later Blanco was found lying by the side of a country road, shot twice in the head. He died shortly afterward.

Spain went into mourning. A half-million people demonstrated in the streets of Madrid. The same number -- one quarter of the entire Basque-country population -- marched in Bilbao, calling for an end to the violence.

Since then, Madrid has intensified police efforts against ETA, but the more important developments may be occurring in this region. The town council of the village of Mondragon threw out its mayor, a member of ETA's political wing, and replaced him with a moderate from the mainstream Basque National Party. And some residents of Bilbao are boycotting restaurants and stores owned by people with ETA connections. The feeling is that ETA has gone too far.

Fewer Basques are aligning themselves with ETA's political arm, called Herri Batasuna (Popular Unity). Herri Batasuna has refused to condemn the ETA killings on grounds that they will stop when all the Basque provinces, including those in France and in the neighboring Spanish region of Navarre, are politically united and can exercise their right to self-determination.

"We say if ETA continues the armed struggle, it is because there is no Basque democracy," said Karmelo Landa Mendibe, the party spokesman and one of 11 Herri Batasuna members of the Basque regional parliament. "In situations of violence, there are always victims."

To Herri Batasuna, the museum, the subway, the airport and the other projects are part of a Spanish plot to buy off Basque nationalism. "The museum is fantastic; the building is magnificent, but it should not be used as a mirror to hide the truth," Landa said. "The investment for the museum has drained funds for Basque cultural activities. We have other cultural and social needs." Among them is an unemployment rate of 23 percent, one of the highest in Spain.

The museum has cost a great deal of money indeed -- about \$100 million to design and build, plus overhead and art acquisition that bring the total cost to roughly \$130 million. And it will lose money each year even if a forecast of 500,000 visitors annually proves accurate. Moreover, Inaki Esteban, coauthor of a book on the museum, has

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pointed out that museums do not have a great track record as anchors for economic development.

But even the most ardent supporters of the development of Bilbao fear that new transport systems and fine office buildings will not stop the killing no matter how slim support becomes for ETA and Herri Batasuna, which received 15 percent of the vote in the last regional election. The problem, they say, is that ETA is not really a political organization at all, but a kind of economic way of life.

By demanding the regular payment of so-called "revolution taxes" -- protection money -- from companies and rich individuals, ETA has created a self-perpetuating organization that will fight to preserve itself no matter how much autonomy and political pride come to the Basque country. Landa confirmed that ETA survives on these payments.

BASQUE COUNTRY

AREA STILL SEEKING SELF-DETERMINATION

The Basque country covers an area of 8,000 square miles, mostly in Spain, but a small northeastern portion lies in France. Basque nationalists divide the area into six "historical territories," but these do not coincide with official Spanish and French political subdivisions.

Population: 3 million

Unemployment: 21 percent

Language: Basque is one of Europe's oldest languages, spoken by 25 percent of the people of the region.

Nationalist struggle: Nearly 800 people have been killed in 30 years of violence.

@CAPTION: The \$100 million Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which opens in October, was financed by local Basque funds. It is part of a \$1 billion development project intended to build nationalist pride and undercut the ETA, a terrorist separatist group.

@CAPTION: Young people sit by a wall with Basque separatist graffiti near an entrance to Bilbao's new subway system, which is modeled after Washington's Metro.