

Spanish PM pays personal price after bomb derails Eta peace talks

By Mark Mulligan and
Victoria Burnett in Madrid

It was a buoyant José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero who last Friday delivered an unerringly upbeat review of the Spanish government's achievements in 2006.

As well as presiding over a roaring economy and laying the legislative foundation for a healthier, more tolerant Spain, the prime minister had sown the seeds of a peace process that could end 40 years of violence by Eta, the Basque separatist group.

Mr Zapatero ventured that Spain would be even "better off in a year's time than it was at the end of 2006". Less than 24 hours after uttering

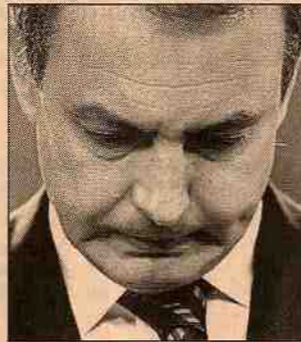
those words, Mr Zapatero was forced to eat them. A car bomb at Madrid's Barajas airport that killed two people made a mockery of his optimism as it derailed the peace process on which he had staked much of his political credibility.

"This is a huge setback for the prime minister," said Antonio Camuñas, head of Global Strategies, a Madrid lobbying group. "By making the peace process his personal project - there were no teams, no delegation - the risk was that a failure would be a personal failure."

The suspension of the Eta process marks the first big defeat for a leader who has managed, through formida-

ble charm, shrewdness and unshakeable conviction, to steer his country leftwards since winning a surprise victory in the March 2004 election, two days after devastating non-Eta bomb attacks on the Madrid commuter rail network. It underlines the limitations of a determined optimist who, political insiders complain, fails to take counsel or heed political alarm bells.

"Mr Zapatero has dominated his party much like Tony Blair has dominated the [British] Labour party," said David Mathieson from Frida, a left-leaning Madrid think-tank. "When things are going well for him, it reflects well on the govern-



Zapatero: lost momentum

ment; when he stumbles, the whole government wobbles."

The setback over Eta exposed a fundamental flaw in the power base built by Mr Zapatero since election victory, said Mr Camuñas.

By alienating moderates within his socialist party, and securing parliamentary support by ceding to the, at times, radical demands of Spain's regionalist parties, he had driven the opposition Popular party to the right.

Mr Zapatero must now scramble to regain momentum before next year's election, analysts say. The Eta talks dominated in recent months - to the chagrin of Mr Zapatero's aides - leaving little space to highlight the government's success with grassroots policies.

On Friday, Mr Zapatero pointed to tax cuts, market reforms and unprecedented spending on research and development and education.

His government has clamped down on smoking in public, drink-driving, domestic violence and pushed through a law to help those caring for the elderly and disabled.

However, critics claim that on the international stage, Mr Zapatero has failed to win Spain a voice commensurate with its growing economic stature.

He has failed to back up ambitious, yet vague, foreign policy proposals with action. Despite promoting a Middle East initiative, the prime minister has not visited the region. He has stopped Spanish troops in Afghanistan from moving to the region where fighting is fiercest.

Allies, however, point to

his deft management of issues close to Spanish hearts. Mr Zapatero was quick to withdraw troops from Iraq following his election. He defied sceptics when he won continued European Union development funds for the next five years and has secured promises of greater assistance dealing with the flood of African immigrants who use Spain as a backdoor into Europe.

Foreign policy also does not traditionally rank high on the electorate's agenda. "Foreign policy is never a vote winner - it can be a vote loser," says Charles Powell, a professor of history at the San Pablo CEU university in Madrid.

In an attempt to regain political ground at home, the government this week was planning a series of social policy initiatives "that Spaniards really care about", said a Socialist party official.

In an apparent effort to bury the hatchet with the opposition Popular party, the government will seek a multi-party anti-terrorism pact next week.

However, officials admitted the chances of reviving peace talks during Mr Zapatero's term in office were virtually nil.

"His government has lost the momentum," said Mr Camuñas. "It will be very hard for him to retake control of the political agenda."