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Only Basque language newspaper closed by Spanish judge due to alleged ETA link

Bilbao 21/02/03, by Jaume Clotet

Euskaldunon Egunkaria, the only newspaper in the Basque Country was closed yesterday by order of the National Audience, a special court in Madrid which only takes cases related to terrorism or big crimes. According to this court, the newspaper 'belongs to or collaborates with ETA', the armed organisation which seeks a Basque independent State. Moreover, judge Juan del Olmo considers that ETA finances the newspaper 'in connection with its terrorist strategy'.

The operation was carried out by the paramilitary corps Civil Guard, which searched the offices of Euskaldunon Egunkaria in Andoain, Pamplona, Bilbao and Vitoria, the Basque political capital. The only office they could not search was the one in Baiona, the part of the Basque Country under French administration. All those offices searched were shut down and ten people, including the director Martxelo Otamendi, were arrested and transferred to Madrid.

Euskaldunon Egunkaria was founded in 1990 after 150 million pesetas (900.000 euro) were raised in a popular campaign. Since then, it has managed to sell 13.000 copies each week from Tuesday to Sunday and it is believed that around 50.000 people read it regularly. The fact that it is the only Basque language newspaper in the world means that many schools and language academies use it with the students as a learning tool.

Apart from entering the four offices of the newspaper, the Civil Guard also searched other places, such as the headquarters of two Basque magazines: the weekly Argia and the linguistic publication Jakin. From both places, they took some documents and software. Finally, the federation of Basque private schools was also searched because one of the arrested journalists also works there as communications coordinator.

Nevertheless, the journalists of the newspaper managed to use their only operational office in Baiona and, thanks to the cooperation of other Basque media, launched a very short Basque newspaper, called Egunero. With only 16 pages, the workers want to issue it every day until they can recover all their offices or the case is cleared in court.

After this police operation, many institutions and organisations in the Basque Country expressed their sorrow. The counsellor of Culture of the Basque government, Miren Azkarate, gave an official statement in which she expressed the concern of the autonomous administration and urged the case to be 'urgently cleared' so that 'the Basque language would not be involved' in these kind of political disputes.