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Occupation of Iraq a 'fiasco': Spanish leader

BY ED MCCULLOUGH

MADRID, Spain (AP-CP) — Prime minister-elect Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero condemned the United States' "shock and awe" strategy for combating terror and called the occupation of Iraq "a fiasco."

In a radio interview today, Zapatero also remained firm in his intent to withdraw 1,300 Spanish peacekeeping troops from Iraq, even if U.S. President George W. Bush tries to talk him out of it.

"I will listen to President Bush, but my position is clear and very firm," the Socialist leader said.

Rather than defeat terrorism, U.S. military actions risk fuelling it, he said, reinforcing his sharp break with the pro-U.S. policies of the defeated Spanish government of outgoing conservative Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar.

"Combating terrorism with bombs, with operations of shock and awe, with Tomahawk missiles, is not the way to beat terrorism; not like that," said Zapatero. "It is a way of generating more radicalism, more people who can wind up being tempted by using violence.

"Terrorism is fought by the state of law," he said. "I believe this is what Europe and the international community must debate."

The election defeat Sunday of Aznar's Popular party marked the first time a government that backed the Iraq war has been voted out of office. The elections were shaken by train bombings that killed 201 people in the Spanish capital three days earlier.

The attacks led to accusations that Aznar's support of the Iraq war had made Spain a target for terrorism. Angry voters turned to Zapatero, who campaigned against the war and the stationing of Spanish troops in Iraq.

However, in his hour-long interview with Onda Cero radio, Zapatero stressed that combating terrorism is as high a priority for him as it was for Aznar. Although he'll go about it differently, he said he will reinforce Spain's defences, no matter the cost.

Zapatero also vowed to better co-ordinate Spanish police agencies and to relentlessly hunt down terrorists.

"They will not have a moment of rest," Zapatero said, adding that he would have a single director for both the Civil Guard and the National Police, which currently answer to two chiefs.

Zapatero's threatened troop withdrawal has worried U.S., British and some other world leaders, who say pulling out of Iraq after the bombings would amount to a victory for terrorists.

But Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham said removing troops "is obviously a matter for Spaniards to decide. The issue of Iraq is related to, but distinct from our war against terrorism.

"It's clear that the Spanish government has said 'we're committed' — as we all are — to the struggle against terrorism," Graham said during a visit to Toronto. "We're all seeking to establish how we can establish stability in Iraq."

Today, the regional Catalan party Convergence and Union, which has 10 seats in the new Spanish Parliament, endorsed the troop withdrawal.

"Spain should never have supported an illegal war," said party leader Artur Mas. He attributed Zapatero's win in part to antiwar feelings in Spain.

Some 5,000 supporters gathered outside the headquarters of Aznar's party today, accusing Zapatero of being soft on terrorism. Waving flags and banners, they protested Zapatero's upset win.

"Zapatero, president of Al Qaeda!" "Zapatero with terrorism!" and "Zapatero resign!" they chanted.

The protesters left about 30 minutes after the Popular party's defeated candidate, Mariano Rajoy, appeared and greeted the crowd from a balcony.

Zapatero is putting together a Socialist government to take over next month. But decisions to be made already are piling up.

Environmentalists want to know whether he favours a huge plan to divert water from the Ebro River to southern Spain. They don't. He doesn't either. "It's not a good plan," he said.

The 43-year-old lawyer pledged to set up a new housing ministry to fulfil an electoral promise to build more low- and moderate-income dwellings. Asked if that wasn't a utopian solution, he responded, "No more utopian than (the prospect) that I would win the election."

Most pre-election polls projected the conservatives would lose their absolute majority in Parliament, but nevertheless win the most seats. They wound up

with 148, a drop of 35. The Socialists won 164, 12 less than an absolute majority but 39 more than they won in the 2000 election.

Politically, the Socialists would like to have a working majority in Parliament. Zapatero repeated today that he intends to form a cabinet exclusively with Socialists, except for possible "independents, but near the Socialist" party on issues.

That stance may or may not win over customary allies like the United Left, which won five seats Sunday. Coalition leader Gaspar Llamazares said today he'd like to co-operate, but will not promise a "blank cheque" to the Socialists.

Mas said his party said in the campaign it would not enter into any government, neither with the Popular party nor the Socialists, but would cast votes on a case-by-case basis.

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