

Terrorists bomb trains in Madrid

Robert Duncan/CNS

MADRID, Spain — Witnesses who entered the wreckage of Madrid's terrorist train explosions spoke of the unceasing sound of cellular telephones ringing as victims' families tried to contact them.

Grim images dominated local television, with body parts and blood splattered on twisted metal, as priests administered last rites.

At a Madrid Mass the day of the bombings, a priest asked, "How can there be such evil in this world?"

At least 200 people died and more than 1,500 were injured as 10 bombs exploded on commuter trains March 11. The majority of the victims were workers or students commuting into the capital.

Madrid's priests were instructed by Cardinal Antonio Rouco Varela to make helping the victims their priority.

Priests were sent to the scene and to hospitals, morgues and the provisional morgue at Madrid's convention center, said Maria Gamazo Lopez, archdiocesan spokeswoman.

The priests' response was so rapid that in some sites they initially were not allowed to enter, since there were still bomb threats.

A makeshift chapel was set up outside the provisional morgue; priests there organized a Mass and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament to coincide with a national demonstration March 12.

Father Jose Anon of St. Albert the Great Parish, near the El Pozo station where some of the attacks occurred, told Catholic News Service, "As you can imagine, the scene was horrible. Such pain. Normally, the people first arrived nervous, afraid of the unknown. Later, when the lists (of dead) were announced, it was a very emotional time."

Father Anon said he also was impressed with the reaction of many South Americans, especially those from Ecuador.

"You could tell that they had a lot of faith, and they sought us (priests) out," he said.

Among those at the convention center was Bishop Jesus Catala Ibanez of Alcala de Henares, whose diocese accounted for at least 40 of the victims, Father Anon said.

Spanish Interior Minister Angel Acebes initially said there was "no doubt" that the Basque separatist movement ETA was responsible for the bombings. Spanish forces recently foiled four potential ETA terrorist attacks, the most recent in early March as terrorists attempted to deliver more than 1,100 pounds of explosives into Madrid.

Spanish authorities also were investigating links to al-Qaida.

Some security sources said the bombings departed from traditional ETA actions by using multiple, simultaneous explosions with no prior warning. The bombings also killed at least eight times more people than



Reuters/CNS

Candles are lit in central Barcelona March 11 for the victims of the Madrid train bombings earlier the same day. Bomb blasts had ripped through four packed commuter trains in Spain's capital during morning rush hour. The death toll has reached 200, with more than 1,500 people injured in the explosions.

the ETA's previous most deadly attack.

Immediately after the explosions, Cardinal Rouco called for Masses to be held throughout the archdiocese.

At an evening Mass concelebrated by three bishops and 80 priests in Madrid's Our Lady of Almudena Cathedral, church leaders read a telegram from Pope John Paul II and an earlier statement from the Spanish bishops' conference.

Pope John Paul said the terrorist attacks "offend God, violate the fundamental right to life and suffocate the peaceful coexistence for which the church community and the noble Spanish nation deeply yearn."

"The Holy Father wants to reiterate his firm and absolute condemnation of such unjustifiable acts," Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Vatican secretary of state, said in the telegram to Cardinal Rouco.

The Spanish bishops also blamed the ETA for the attacks, saying the group "judged political ends superior to peoples' lives and the state of law."

The bishops' conference executive committee said in a statement, "The terrorist organization ETA has perpetrated an attack in Madrid today more bloody and brutal than any in its already long history of terror."

Speaking to the nation via state television, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar promised the victims and families that the entire Spanish nation was with them "now and forever."

"Any terrorist act lacks reason, but this was a terrorist act by Spaniards on Spaniards," Aznar said.

The prime minister said the Spanish government "isn't going to negotiate" with the ETA, adding, "Let nobody doubt that we are going to get rid of this terrorist group," he said.

ETA stands for Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or Basque Homeland and Freedom; it seeks an independent Basque nation. Since being formed in the 1950s, the ETA has claimed responsibility for killing more than 800.

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