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The end of ETA

A new era opens in the struggle of the Basque people

“ETA has decided to conclude its historical cycle and has completely dismantled all of its structures”: the ETA statement delivered via a video made public at the Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, the headquarters of the Red Cross, signals the end of an era.

“We have made this, our last decision, in order to foster a new historical phase. ETA was born from the people and now it dissolves back into the people.” So concludes the declaration that brings to an end a story that began on 31 July 1959 at the height of the Francoist years. A page was turned in the history of the Basque people this 2 May 2018. But Euskal Herria, the Basque nation with its seven provinces - three in the Autonomous Community (Gipuzkoa, Biskaia, Araba), Navarra (Nafarroa) and three in France (Labourd/Lapurdi, Basse Navarre/Benaffarrea, Soule/Zuberoa) - continues its struggle for the recognition of the rights of the Basque people in Europe.

The end of ETA has been on the agenda since 2010, when the clandestine organisation announced a cease-fire. It has never taken up arms since, and now, eight years on, has been finally disbanded. In 2011, the Donostia-San Sebastián International Peace Conference brought together an international committee of distinguished figures including former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Brian Currin, the international expert known for his work in post-apartheid reconciliation in South Africa, the former French Interior Minister Pierre Joxe, and several figures who played a significant part in resolving the Northern Irish conflict three years earlier: Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams, the President of Ireland at the time of the 1998 Good Friday agreement, Bertie Ahern, and the leader of the negotiations on the British side, Tony Blair’s chief of staff Jonathan Powell.

The Donostia-San Sebastián International Peace Conference led to the creation of an international group to provide monitoring and ongoing verification of ETA’s undertakings with a view to disarmament and the end of its activities. This high-level group applied pressure to obtain reciprocal gestures from the Spanish State - on the fate of political prisoners still scattered as far as possible from their homes, and on a negotiation, secret if necessary, to facilitate the peace process. But in vain: Spain, unlike the United Kingdom, remained obdurate, making progress more difficult, longer and more hazardous.

This attitude was deplored at the meeting in the French Basque Country town of Cambo-

les-Bains organised by mediators to certify the dismantling of ETA and the final commitment of the nationalist movement to a peaceful and democratic approach. Brian Currin, Jonathan Powell and Gerry Adams all attended. All the movements on the nationalist left were represented, as was the Basque National Party (PNV), the party promoting Basque autonomy in the South, and Podemos, the sole party on the Spanish political chess board to have made any effort at dialogue.

Brian Currin spoke on behalf of the International Contact Group which was involved at every stage in the process, and which played an active role in the dismantling of the eight weapons dumps that the Basque organisation had concealed on French soil. Certifying its end, he gave this collective undertaking: "The dissolution of ETA is final. It is the fruit of dialogue. It is a pity that the French and Spanish governments have not been involved. But the journey is complete."

A new era now opens in the struggle of the Basque people. Violence once divided them. Now it is time for them to unite forces in a democratic approach to self-determination.