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Spain : Closure of Basque newspaper must be investigated promptly

Amnesty International today called on the Spanish authorities to act promptly to clarify and substantiate the grounds on which a Basque-language newspaper was shut down, and a number of persons arrested.

On 20 February a National Court judge ordered the precautionary closure of the Basque newspaper *Euskaldunon Egunkaria* - the only newspaper written entirely in the Basque language - and the arrest of 10 persons associated with the newspaper. These included the Jesuit priest, Padre Txema Auzmendi, S.J, and one of the directors, Peio Zubiria, who yesterday reportedly attempted suicide. All were arrested, held incommunicado under the anti-terrorist legislation and taken to the National Court in Madrid.

The judge justified the closure and arrests in a decision in which he stated that the company which published *Egunkaria* was created, financed and directed by the Basque armed group *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA). The newspaper, which was founded in 1990, allegedly contributed to a Basque-language information structure which facilitated the dissemination of "terrorist" ideology. As yet, the concrete basis for the decision has not been made clear.

The Basque Government, which has reportedly subsidised *Egunkaria* for a number of years, requested urgent clarification of the basis for the closure and arrests. In a separate statement, the Company of Jesus expressed concern about the arrest of Padre Auzmendi, "publicly recognized for his clear opposition to violence" and defence of the "marginalized" and vulnerable.

The precautionary closure of *Egunkaria* follows the unrelated case of the closure of the Basque newspaper *Egin* by a National Court judge in 1998. *Egin* was suspected of printing coded messages to ETA and of being an instrument of "terrorism". The closure order was lifted a year later but a trial hearing has still not taken place.

Amnesty International, which only 10 days ago, again expressed its unreserved condemnation of the human rights abuses committed by ETA, recognizes the responsibility of the judiciary to take any appropriate measures essential to the protection of life and integrity.

"However, an action as serious as the closure of a newspaper, and the arrest of those involved in its production - has clearly injurious consequences for the fundamental right to freedom of expression", Amnesty International warned. "It is, therefore, imperative that any

judicial investigation is prompt and thorough".

Public Document

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