

All eyes on Spain

Written by Gamal Nkrumah (Al ahram weekly)

Policy makers in Washington and other Western capitals would do well to ponder the capacity of well-timed terrorist attacks to influence democratic elections in the wake of the 11 March terrorist attacks in Madrid. The lesson has doubtless not been lost on terrorist groups around the world.

It is particularly important to take stock now of the international war against terrorism and to assess its political implications. Democracy cannot be imposed by military might. Can it be imposed by any means? The United States is determined to shuttle through its version of multi-party democracy for the Arab and Muslim world in the so-called Greater Middle East Initiative, scheduled to be officially presented, discussed and reviewed by the leaders of the world's richest and most industrially advanced countries at the G8 summit meetings in Savannah, Georgia, in June. Not a single Arab country will be present.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell is currently on a tour of South Asia and the Middle East while mop-up operations are underway in the volatile frontier region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. US and Pakistani troops are engaged in "Mountain Storm", a sweeping military operation to force ethnic Pashtun tribesmen to surrender fugitive members of Al-Qa'eda and their sympathisers. What the tragedy of 11 March in Madrid so graphically demonstrates is that the US has failed to smoke out Al-Qa'eda and other terrorist organisations.

It seems almost certain that the militant Islamist Al-Qa'eda, or groups affiliated to it, carried out the attacks. Be that as it may, it is perhaps crucial at this particular moment to remember that Arab and Muslim peoples have been the prime targets of militant Islamist terrorism. The same group, or an affiliated group, which carried out the terrorist attacks that killed 43 innocent civilians in the Moroccan city of Casablanca in May 2003, probably also perpetrated last Thursday's Spanish tragedy. The North African countries of Algeria and Morocco have been rocked by numerous terrorist attacks over the past decade by disgruntled militant Islamists.

Algeria teetered on the verge of civil war precisely because of the secular government's fight against the country's militant Islamists.

The Mediterranean separates the Spanish and North African coasts. At its narrowest point, nonetheless, the western reaches of Morocco are less than 25 kilometres away from Spain. Algeria is less than 150 kilometres away. The events of 11 March graphically illustrate that the continental boundary between Europe and its neighbours is blurring.

The close geographical proximity of both Morocco and Algeria to Spain means that Spanish shores are often the first point of entry for North Africans seeking greener pastures in the European Union. Spain is home to an estimated one million Muslims, and there are officially some 300,000 Moroccan residents in the country.

Spanish security, as last Thursday's Madrid bombings demonstrated, is inextricably intertwined with that of its neighbours across the Mediterranean.

Given this co-dependence, it is vitally important that the Muslim communities in Spain are not now victimised in revenge killings by Spanish neo-fascists and ultra-rightists. Spain's Muslims, as all the international media coverage reported, were as shocked and outraged by last Thursday's bombings as their non-Muslim compatriots. There were, after all, many Muslims among the victims of the bombings.

Recently released results of a PEW Research Centre poll show conclusively that anti-American sentiment is growing even among America's closest European allies. Even before the Madrid bombing, there was a strong anti-war sentiment in Spain. Such feelings of outrage and indignation against US foreign policy, its aggression and occupation of Iraq especially, will only be intensified after 11 March.

Washington's European and Arab allies are in danger of paying a terrible price for their subservience to American dictates, and their disregard of domestic public opinion. European voters recognise those dangers, are the target of terrorist attacks, and will act on their own if their governments do not. The results of the Spanish elections clearly demonstrate this.

The US needs to rethink its security strategy. The Bush administration has made the world less safe, not more. Not only are American lives at risk. The lives of residents of countries politically and militarily aligned to the US are endangered now as never before.

"I hope this will not change Spanish attitudes toward the war on terror and toward their efforts in Iraq," stated Powell soon after the bombings. Alas, he was way off the mark. Jose Rodriguez Zapatero has consistently pledged to pull Spanish troops out of Iraq. Powell later played down the significance of a possible withdrawal. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, NATO is being geared up to take up a mandate in Iraq. It would be difficult for Spain to fall out of line with this, the main source of its own collective security.

Regardless, there is great anticipation in Spain and Europe that Spanish foreign policy is about to change. Spain today, perhaps. Italy tomorrow?