



Ex-President Aznar lays the foundation stone for the PHN project in February 2004, in spite of vociferous protests. Right, the famous "knot" protest symbol \NEFE and Abraham Sebastià

PP water plan abolished

The plan had attracted fierce criticism from many regions of Spain for financial and environmental reasons

The news was released yesterday that José Luís Zapatero's coalition government has kept its promise to abolish the highly controversial Plan Nacional Hidrológico (National water plan - commonly known as the PHN) - which would have involved the channelling of 100 billion litres of water from the river Ebro in the north to the more arid southern regions of Spain, such as Andalusia and Murcia.

The plan was instigated three years ago by José María Aznar's Partido Popular government, and in fact work had already begun on the

project before the PP was ousted in this year's March elections. The PHN would have involved the creation of over one hundred new dams, as well as hundreds of kilometres of irrigation channels which would be used to transfer the water southwards.

The conservatives' plan came in for fierce criticism from the very beginning, and led to scores of massive demonstrations taking place in the main cities around Spain. The largest of to take place in Barcelona was held in March 2003, and was attended by an estimated 300,000 people,

including Catalans, Aragonese and Galicians. Criticism of the project was based on the belief that, firstly, it would be astronomically expensive (the government's estimate was 4.3 billion Euro), and secondly, that it would cause enormous and irreparable environmental damage to a large part of the country.

Instead of the PHN, the new Spanish government is backing an alternative water plan that will involve constructing desalination plants along the coast. This plan, which at 3.7 billion Euro will be significantly cheaper, will create fifteen

plants and will be much faster to set up than the PHN.

Environment minister Cristina Narbona said "Everyone can understand that it is more logical to build a desalination plant close to where the water is needed rather than to bring water down through a 900-kilometre pipeline".

Meanwhile, environmental groups that campaigned against the PHN have said that they prefer desalination as an alternative but they still do not believe that the new proposal resolves all the outstanding issues.

"It is not a panacea", said Mario Rodriguez from Greenpeace, "there are still some major issues that have not been tackled, such as the problems involving the disposal of residual salt".

José Perez, the spokesman for the PP, complained that the new government will be destroying the dreams of many people in southern Spain, and thousands of people are getting ready to protest against the government's decision in the city of Valencia, which was to have been one of the recipients of the piped water supply.

EU leaders close to deal on new constitution

European Union leaders were said to be "tantalisingly close" to an agreement on a new constitution.

The news broke shortly after France and the United Kingdom had publicly criticised each other over the slow progress of the talks. Dick Roche, Ireland's Europe minister, described the atmosphere as positive and said that only the "final finessing of the endpoints" remained, claiming that the outstanding issues were ones of detail.

Ireland, current holder of the rotating EU presidency, has put forward a compromise draft constitution which both Germany and France have promised to back. Agreement has also been reached over the contentious issue of reforming the voting rules, hitherto dogged by the demand for a veto. Under the new plan measures must be backed by at least 55 per cent of

the EU's 25 member states, representing at least 65 per cent of the population.

Britain is thought to have won concessions on the veto issue but Catherine Colonna, a spokeswoman for Jacques Chirac, the French president, said: "We will not agree to further dilute what has been proposed by the Irish presidency. We have to stop the backsliding."

A spokesman for UK Prime Minister Tony Blair hit back at this statement by saying "It was unfortunate that President Chirac chose to attack our position before the negotiations had begun".

The UK is also at odds with France and Germany over Romano Prodi's successor - the UK has suggested Chris Patten, but the other two want Belgian PM Guy Verhofstadt. The decision will be made after Prodi steps down in October.

More Iraqis die in attacks

Insurgent Iraqi forces battled American troops yesterday for the second consecutive day, resulting in the death of seven Iraqis, just a day after 41 Iraqi citizens died in two car-bomb attacks. The firefight began when a group of insurgents launched a rifle attack on a group of American military convoy near Baqubai, about 60 kilometres from Baghdad. Several Islamic leaders have condemned the car-bomb attacks. "These actions do not hurt the enemy, they hurt Iraqis, their children and their property", said sheik Taha, a Suni leader. Recently there have been various attacks against Iraqi security forces, who some resistance groups accuse of co-operating with American occupation forces. The rising tensions in Iraq have been increasing as the June 30 date for the American transfer of power to Iraqis nears. Also in Iraq, an international coalition is working to repair a system of pipelines that was damaged by insurgent attacks this week. Exports of oil from Iraq are scheduled to resume next week.

Hostage execution date today

Security officers in Saudi Arabia were searching for American hostage Paul Marshal Johnson yesterday as today's deadline that a group backed by Osama bin Laden had set for him to be executed. The group is demanding that the Saudi government release jailed militants in exchange for freeing the hostage. Johnson's family have sent a personal message through the media to his captors, urging them to release him.

Yesterday there were more than 15,000 Saudi officers participating in the search for Johnson, sometimes entering civilian homes. According to one Saudi official in Washington, more than 1,200 homes had been searched as of Thursday night.

Death sentence for mistress

An Iranian football star's mistress has been sentenced to death for killing his wife. A court in Iran found Khadijeh Shahla Jahed guilty of the stabbing murder of Laleh Saharkhizan, the wife of Nasser Mohammad

Khani, who had been a top Iranian football player in the late 1980s and later became the coach of the Persepolis club in Tehran. The murder occurred two years ago while Khani was in Germany on a training trip. Khani and Shahla Jahed had lived together under a temporary marriage, which is permitted according to Shia Islamic codes. The case was covered heavily by the Iranian media.

Madonna is now Esther

In her newest transformation, American singer Madonna has decided to change her name to Esther, a Hebrew name which she adopted in accordance with her belief in the study of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. "I was named after my mother. My mother died when she was very young, of cancer and I wanted to attach myself to another name", she said during an interview on the American television programme *20/20*. In the old testament of the Bible, Esther is the queen who saved the Jews from a massacre, an event which is celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Purim.