

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION

Photograph by Eve de Castro/Queen International

Ever since the bomb intended to kill her failed to detonate, university lecturer Edurne Uriarte has not been able to leave her house without bodyguards. Just one of over a thousand politicians, journalists and academics on the ETA hit list, she tells Eamonn O'Neill about what it's like to live with the threat of violence

BITING THE BULLET

WE MEET in a café in the centre of Bilbao. By the time I arrive, Edurne Uriarte, a 41-year-old senior lecturer in politics at the university 12 miles away, is already in deep conversation with a friend. Moments later the friend leaves us alone to speak. I watch her walk off down the street and vanish into the early-evening crowds.

"She's on an ETA hit list too," remarks Uriarte. She smiles and sips her coffee. She looks like any other flawlessly dressed, manicured professional from this wealthy region of Spain. But she's not like everyone else. Each conversation, each cup of coffee, could be her last. Because she never knows when she might be murdered by terrorists.

Edurne Uriarte has lived like this for the last two years. It began in 2000 when she was taken aside by a journalist friend and told that her name was on an ETA hit list. The police confirmed this and admitted they should have alerted her to the fact earlier – only they'd "forgotten". From that point on, Uriarte has had government-financed bodyguards with her wherever she goes in case ETA hitmen try to kill her.

And they have.

On Monday, 18 December 2000, Uriarte and her bodyguard entered a lift at the university. Suddenly they heard a noise – not an explosion exactly, but something unusual. Sensing something was wrong, they fled the building. Later, the police visited Uriarte and informed her that they'd detonated a large bomb at the university. If the device had gone off as planned, it would have been Spain's single worst terrorist atrocity in its 30-year war with ETA.

"I wasn't really scared by the bomb," says Uriarte, staring at her coffee. "I only thought that I was lucky because it didn't explode. And my feelings have never changed because I have always been aware of the danger, both before and after."

During the previous year, Spanish intelligence officials from the country's counter-terrorist unit, the GEO, had been aware that ETA was planning a large-scale attack. They knew it was going to happen – but not when or where.

These suspicions were confirmed by abortive earlier attacks elsewhere. In 1999, for example, ETA had planned to end its 14-month-old ceasefire on the eve of the millennium with a so-called "Christmas Massacre". During the questioning of two members of the terrorist organisation, police chief Juan Cotino discovered that the group was planning to blow up Madrid's tallest building, the Picasso Tower, in which 5,000 people work. Until that point, all the police had had to go on were intelligence rumours and their seizure of two vans used by ETA that contained almost two tonnes of explosives. The indications were that something big was coming.

If her lucky stars hadn't lined up in December 2000, Uriarte's husband and child would have had little of her mortal remains to mourn.

It is thought that the reason both Edurne Uriarte in particular and the faculty in general were targeted was simply because the department and many of the students had come out against the terrorists and their political wing, Batasuna. Additionally, Uriarte was a well-known columnist for a national newspaper and a frequent media pundit who had taken ▶



