

HEALING THE DARK PAST IN ETA-HIT RENTERIA

RENERIA, Spain: Since ETA declared a ceasefire in 2011, Renteria has slowly been recovering from decades of upheaval marked by violent protests, murders and torture brought about by the conflict waged by the Basque separatist group. For some in this former industrial town in northern Spain, that involves walking the streets without a bodyguard, others are savoring living without fear, while still more say they enjoy the sight of tourists in their once-restive home.

And while news that ETA may finally fully lay down its weapons on Saturday is welcome, many are looking beyond with a pressing question-how do you heal the wounds of a town once torn by strife and hate? "This city has known tumultuous periods," acknowledges Julen Mendoza, mayor of the 40,000-strong town. Renteria was the scene of more than 20 ETA killings, ranging from taxi drivers to policemen and town councilors, according to a report by regional rights group Argituz.

The report also details the seven murders and other torture cases inflicted by "parapolice" groups, such as the so-called GAL death squads established illegally in the 1980s by officials of Spain's then Socialist government to counter ETA. Interspersed throughout were fierce, sometimes violently repressed protests all of which bred resentment in a town, whose fervent nationalism and sense of Basque identity appears only to be matched by its deep suspicion of the central government.

Too many funerals

"I was six-months pregnant with my daughter, and a policeman hit me in the gut, I had to go to hospital," remembers Lourdes Irizar Rezola, a 59-year-old cleaner, pointing to a corner in the town centre where the incident happened over 30 years ago. Staunchly pro-independence, she was attending protests for the rights of people from the nationalist left who had been jailed.

And while acknowledging the violence wrought by ETA in its four-decades campaign of bombings and shootings for an independent Basque homeland that left 829 people dead, her most vivid memory is of police violence which, she says, marked protests. A couple of streets away, Miguel Buen sits in an office above the bar at the headquarters of his Socialist party, in power when he became mayor of Renteria in 1987, a post he held for 18 years.

His story is one marked by threats by ETA, whose bloody battle put it on a collision course with the central government, be it Socialist or conservative. "I've sadly had to attend too many funerals of colleagues and friends, and others I didn't know, of councilors from the (conservative) Popular Party, businessmen, people who were merely passing by," he says. The headquarters where Buen now sits were attacked 28 times during the period of upheaval-with the occasional Molotov cocktail thrown in.

The ground floor used to have automatic fire extinguishers and bars on the windows and door-all of which have now been removed. Things have changed for Buen too, who at 69 is now retired. "For five years now I have been walking through the streets of my town, of any town in Euskadi (Basque Country) without bodyguards," he says. "People don't harass me, many people who wouldn't greet me before now greet me."—AFP



RENERIA: A woman walks past a graffiti reading in Basque "We want them in our neighborhood", referring to Basque prisoners, in the Spanish northern village of Renteria, Spain.—AFP



MOSUL: Civilians who were injured during the ongoing conflict between government forces and Islamic State (IS) group jihadists in Mosul are treated by medics at a trauma field hospital.—AFP

PRIDE AND PAIN AS MOSUL DOCTORS TREAT THEIR OWN

CHILDREN REMAIN PARALYZED WITHOUT AMPUTATIONS

ATHBAH, Iraq: Every time a patient is stretchered into the Athbah field hospital south of Mosul, doctor Sultan prays it isn't his sister or brother. Most of the medical staff is from the war-torn Iraqi city and each one of the victims they treat could be a relative or a neighbor. "It's very painful for us... Many people, many children, need amputations or will remain paralyzed," he says from the small field hospital set up in Athbah, just a few miles south of Mosul.

Sultan, who chose not to divulge his full name, fled Mosul when the Islamic State still controlled the city, which they made the de facto Iraqi capital of their now crumbling "caliphate". But his siblings are trapped inside, in neighborhoods of Mosul's west bank still held by the jihadists despite almost six months of fighting by the security forces to retake the city. "I have no news," he said. "Daesh (IS) uses civilians as human shields and many buildings have been leveled by air strikes. They might be lying under the rubble and I don't know about it." For now, the 43-year-old is treating a man in his forties with facial injuries. "He's stable," he says, after feeling the pulse in the patient's bloodied wrist. In the same room, Faruq Abdulkader is treating a teenager who is writhing in pain but was relatively lucky: "The

bullet went straight through the arm without touching the bone," the doctor said, relieved.

These doctors used to work in Mosul but fled the tyrannical rule of the jihadists. Now that regular forces are wresting back Iraq's second city street by street, they are back to help. The Athbah field hospital opened on March 24 with support from the World Health Organization and the Iraqi health authorities.

Our neighbors

Abdulkader said most of the injuries they treated were caused by explosions but the hardest thing was often to witness the suffering of their own neighbors. "Some of them are our neighbors, coming from the same area where I was living in Mosul, and I'm so sad for them," he said. The fighting to retake what is now the last major IS stronghold in Iraq is taking its toll on civilians.

According to the UN, at least 307 of them were killed between February 17 and March 22, a period which only covers the first weeks of the offensive on west Mosul but not the entire operation that started in mid-October last year. The 29-year-old Abdulkader says he feels lucky to be in a position to support the humanitarian effort because two of his fellow doctors

were killed "one by the jihadists and the other in an air strike."

A patient is rushed in to the trauma unit, the third in half an hour. His face is entirely covered in bandages, bones visible all over his body. The Mosul battle has lasted nearly six months and supplies have dwindled sharply as Iraqi forces secured the city's east bank and sealed their siege on the jihadists' last redoubts on the west side. Basic goods have been unavailable for months and the little food that is left is either too expensive or hoarded by the jihadists.

"Nearly all our patients suffer from malnutrition," says Taryn Anderson, head nurse at the Athbah clinic. "We can't call it a famine but it's very alarming, especially for the children." After examining the very weak patient who was just wheeled in, the doctors decide against a transfusion-the precious blood they do have will be saved for other patients with a real chance of survival.

Ali Saad Abdulkhaled, a 26-year-old nurse who used to treat people in his home in east Mosul during the fighting there, said the number of wounded civilians was increasing sharply. "The west side is more densely populated, it's the Old City," he said. "The number of victims is huge. They are our neighbors, our families."—AFP