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EUROPE

Monday, February 13, 2006 · Last updated 10:19 a.m. PT

Terrorist victims gather in Spain

By MAR ROMAN ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

VALENCIA, Spain -- Survivors and relatives of people killed in terrorist attacks worldwide gathered Monday to share stories of their common tragedy, discuss ways to fight the scourge and hear what governments plan to do to make their citizens safer.

The two-day Congress on Victims of Terrorism in this Mediterranean city in eastern Spain brought together hundreds of people caught up personally in the most horrific attacks of recent years - from Sept. 11 and the Beslan school seizure in Russia to last summer's London transport bombings as well as attacks in Colombia, Israel, Spain and elsewhere.

Many were in wheelchairs, or had limbs missing. Nearly all had stories of heartache.

"When you bring terrorism victims together, you find that we have a common language, a common pain," said Arnold Roth, an Israeli who lost his 15-year-old daughter in a suicide blast at a Jerusalem restaurant in 2002.

"Terrorism has changed almost everything in my life, and since then I remind people, even in my country, how essential it is to stop terrorism," he said, adding: "Terrorism goes beyond politics and that's what victims are totally aware of."

Other participants included victims of Colombia's leftist guerrillas and those wounded in Spain's conflict with Basque separatists in addition to survivors and relatives of the Madrid train bombings that killed 191 people and wounded 1,500 in 2004.

Organizers say the goal of the congress - sponsored by Spain's private San Pablo CEU University - is to allow victims to meet each other and draw the attention of governments and society in general to their needs.

A round-table discussion Monday morning included victims of the Bali attacks in Indonesia, Sept. 11, the Oklahoma bombing, the London attacks, Beslan and attacks in Israel. Later, a round-table focuses on Basque separatist violence and another for victims of rebel attacks in Colombia.

"We, the victims, know about tears, about anger but also about courage," said Maite Pagazaurtundua, a representative of Spanish victims whose brother was killed by the armed Basque separatist group ETA in 2003.

The first International Congress on Victims of Terrorism was held in Madrid in 2004, six weeks before the March 11 train bombings in the Spanish capital. The second was held



Bruce Wallace from the U.S., a member of the September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, listens at the Congress on Victims of Terrorism in Valencia, eastern Spain, Monday Feb. 13, 2006.

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last year in Bogota, Colombia, a nation wracked by decades of violence from insurgents, right-wing paramilitary groups and drug traffickers.

EU Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini called terrorism "the main threat in a democratic society" and vowed that European governments would leave no stone unturned in fighting it.



The congress planned to turn its attention Tuesday to the Madrid train bombings.

"It's an important moment for the victims to be together," said 27-year-old Irene Villa, who lost both legs in an ETA bomb blast a dozen years ago when she was 12. "I feel that when I tell other victims my experience, the pain just disappears."

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