Threat to 100,000 illegal Spanish houses.

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We have to knock them down, says prosecutorPlanners curb fast growth of towns in Andalucia.

Around 100,000 illegal homes, including one owned by a former prime minister, face demolition in Spain, according to a new prosecutor appointed to tackle building fraud and corruption.
Special prosecutor Antonio Vercher said yesterday Spanish law was clear that illegal homes should be demolished, regardless of whether they had been bought in good faith."We have to knock them down," he said, claiming that Spanish judges had been too lenient.

Mr Vercher said he did not believe that most owners were unaware that their houses were illegal, and that many had benefited from lower prices for properties.

He said that a simple check at the local property register, which is routinely carried out by most Spanish home-buyers, should reveal whether a building had been properly approved.

"It is obvious that when you buy you have to go to the register," he told El País newspaper yesterday. "I find it astonishing that people could spend so much money without checking."

El País said that 100,000 homes were illegal, many with licenses wrongly handed out by corrupt or inefficient town planning officials.

Mr Vercher said those people tricked by sellers or builders could take them to court if their homes were demolished. "One would have to use civil law to demand indemnification."

Amongst those liable to be affected by Mr Verger's zealous campaign to pull down illegal buildings is former prime minister José María Aznar, who recently bought an apartment in Marbella in a building that was not properly licensed.

The prosecutor's campaign came as authorities began reacting to outrage over excessive construction, building fraud and town hall corruption.

The regional government of Andalucia, which has 30,000 illegal homes in the province of Malaga alone, has said it will prevent towns from growing at a rate of more than 30% to 40% over eight years, according to El País. The measure will put the brakes on towns which have announced expansion plans to double or triple their size.

Campaigners in south-west Spain, meanwhile, were celebrating a victory over a golf, hotel and villas development near the River Guadiana after local authorities there said they would refuse to grant permission on environmental grounds.

The area involved is a habitat for endangered species such as the Iberian lynx and the Imperial eagle.

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