



Marcelo Del Pozo/Reuters

Prime Minister Zapatero of Spain visiting an old people's home on Monday in Seville, where he spoke out against Basque secession.

Zapatero rejects Basque breakaway

By Renwick McLean

MADRID: Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero spoke out for the first time Monday against the Basque country's declaration last week that it had the right to break away from Spain, saying the region was bound by the Constitution to obey decisions made by the central government in Madrid.

"I have complete confidence that, I insist, this proposal has no legal foundation today," Zapatero said at press conference in Seville. "It has no place in the future of this country."

He said the Constitution was the supreme law of the land for all of Spain's inhabitants, including the Basques, and it could not be violated.

"No one is above the law," he said. The Constitution, he added, is the protector of "our liberty, of everyone's liberty, but also of the liberty of Basque society and its citizens."

The Basque declaration was part of a complex plan approved by the Basque Parliament in Vitoria last week for overhauling the relationship between the regional government and Madrid.

Zapatero said Monday that he was willing to meet with the president of the Basque country, Juan José Ibarretxe, to discuss the plan. But, he stressed, he was not open to negotiating with him.

"We can have a dialogue about anything that is within the Constitution, but nothing that is outside of it," he said.

Mariano Rajoy, the president of Spain's main opposition group, the Popular Party, said that he was united with Zapatero in opposing the Basque plan, which he called "the greatest challenge that Spanish democracy has suffered" since the transition from dictatorship after the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975. But he urged Zapatero to take action that the prime minister has so far refused to endorse.

In Rajoy's view, the Basque plan should be appealed to the Constitutional Court, where he says a victory would send a clear message that none of Spain's 17 semiautonomous regions has the right to defy the authority of the central government.

Zapatero, according to one of his aides, says it is not clear that the court will take the case.

Since the Basque plan has not been adopted by the national Parliament in Madrid, it is not yet a law, meaning the

Prime minister won't negotiate on secession

court may say it falls outside of its jurisdiction, according to the aide.

Rather than focus energy on an uncertain legal process, the aide said, Zapatero prefers to tackle the plan in the political arena, specifically the parliamentary debate that will take place when the plan comes to the floor of the National Congress. The majority of Parliament has already expressed its opposition to the plan, so it is given little chance of passage.

But Basque leaders say they will not give up if their plan is rejected in Parliament, meaning Zapatero's political strategy will have to extend to the Basque country itself, where he will have to convince residents to oppose the plan.

"He wants to offer them an alternative that gives them more autonomy but within the framework of the Constitution," the aide said.

"The most important thing is to defeat this politically," not only in Madrid but also in the Basque country, the aide said.

International Herald Tribune

Study tracks racism in Spain

There has been a significant increase in racism in Spain over the last eight years according to a study cited in the newspaper El País on Monday, Agence France-Presse reported from Madrid.

The number of Spaniards expressing dislike of immigrants rose from 8 percent in 1996 to 32 percent in 2004, according to the study carried out by a sociology professor at the University of Madrid and titled "The Development of Xenophobia in Spain."

The study shows antiforeigner sentiment particularly pronounced against the groups that have most recently immigrated and have the weakest cultural ties to the rest of the country.

Moroccans were at the top of the list of least-tolerated foreigners, followed by immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.

Racism was most notable in areas with the highest concentration of immigrants and was most strongly pronounced among the elderly, conservative voters and Spaniards with lower education and income levels.

Labor Minister Jesús Caldera told El País immigrants had helped dynamize the country's economy.