

# Newsletter. nº 0

February 2003

## Peace for the Basque Country

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### 1. Presentation

This is number 0 of the Newsletter in favour of peace and dialogue in the Basque Country. Its objective is to inform on what is happening in the Basque Country on a regular basis and to support initiatives in favour of non-violence and dialogue as a method of transforming the present situation.

The author of this Newsletter is the social movement for dialogue and agreement, Elkarri. If you would like more information on our activities or send us your comments, you can contact us through the website [www.elkarri.org](http://www.elkarri.org)

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### 2. What is going on in the Basque Country?

At present, Basque society is plural in its political identification and its sentiments of belonging to a nation. Some people would like a Basque Country independent of Spain, others want to keep the status quo and there are those who wish for a framework of self-government that lets the Basques decide their own future. All the opinion surveys over the last 10 years reflect that Basque society: (a) firmly rejects violence (b) considers that there are political problems that need to be solved (c) firmly believes in dialogue and (d) wants to be able to express an opinion on its future status.

In the present debate on the search for peace there are three main positions: (1) ETA considers that the end of its violence should come about as a result of something it considers as a basic prerequisite: self-determination (2) the Spanish government believes in a policing solution and the isolation and illegalisation of Batasuna (pro-independence political party); and (3) the majority of Basques wants to apply a peace process model similar to the Irish one (non-violence, dialogue and plebiscite).

In this context, the Basque conflict is marked by three main realities:

#### 2.1. Infringement of Human Rights

First of all, we should highlight the devastating effects of violence. Despite the fact that the majority of Basque society has rejected it, the pro-independence armed organisation ETA continues to violate the most basic rights of large groups of people. The fact that in a population of less than 3 million, 2000 people have to have bodyguards is unacceptable, and dramatically illustrates the gravity of the situation.

After the ceasefire in 1998, ETA has extended the list of individuals and groups that it considers targets for attack. University lecturers, judges, journalists and local politicians, together with members of the State security forces, have suffered the violence of this organisation, which has led to almost one thousand deaths during its 40+ years of history.

At the same time, Basque society is also experiencing other major violations of Human Rights. Among these we would highlight the threats to non-Nationalist people, cases of torture in police departments (denounced by organisations such as Amnesty International), the systematic dispersion of political prisoners, and so on.

## 2.2. The absence of dialogue

Secondly, social and political life in the Basque Country is characterised by the absence of dialogue. In a situation of a lack of consensus on basic rules for peaceful co-existence, the response that is being given is one of non-communication and mistrust.

Dialogue, which is the main instrument at our disposal to overcome this situation, not only does not take place but also is called into question by the Spanish government itself. Due to this spiral of non-communication and mistrust, the people and organisations who claim a political agenda based on dialogue are accused, without any other reason given, of giving violence 'a breathing space'.

An example of this lack of political dialogue is that the Spanish government is instigating the illegalisation of the pro-independence party Batasuna. This initiative is being seriously challenged, for several reasons. From the point of view of democratic principles, the strategy of illegalisation affects one of the basic tenets of democracy. In constitutional terms, it goes against the fundamental right to freedom of association and the provisions of article 22 of the Spanish Constitution.

At the same time, the strategy of illegalisation is being done in the face of the social context in which it is to be applied. The majority of Basque society rejects the violence of ETA but is against this measure. A peace process necessarily requires the participation of all the political traditions in our country. On the contrary, for the majority of social players and Basque politicians this measure will generate more tension and a worse political atmosphere.

## 2.3. The third reality

The third reality is rather more positive, and has the potential to transform the current situation of violence and conflict. It is the existence of a wide-ranging majority in the Basque Country that shares, cutting across different political opinions, the demand for a peace process based on non-violence and dialogue without exclusions.

All the surveys carried out on this question show that the majority of Basque society (and Spanish society too) supports dialogue as a way of approaching this conflict. Paradoxically, to date no experience of dialogue between all the political forces had taken place to specifically deal with this question. In this context, the creation of the necessary conditions for holding an all party talks that can discuss this question specifically continues to be the great challenge for Basque and Spanish society.

### 3. There is an alternative to the present situation

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The alternative to this situation is to build a peace process. Because the dominant strategies at present are not contributing solutions. In the sense that we all continue to do the same, there are not reasons for thinking that things can change. However, if we rebel against this situation and exploit the opportunities we have to hand, peace is possible.

The most important 'benchmark' for peace in the Basque Country is the Irish peace process. Despite being two very different conflicts, the principles on which the Irish peace experience is built have acquired a universal value. We therefore call on the institutions to lead a process of dialogue, even a similar one that led to the "Good Friday Agreement", and urge the political parties to take part in these negotiations, and call on ETA to call a ceasefire similar to the one offered by the IRA.

There is, therefore, an alternative to the current situation and we should fight for it. A different future depends on the ability of achieving increasing social support for these ideas and presenting clear projects to carry them out. In the face of this challenge our motivation is very strong, based on active solidarity with all victims, and we set out to contribute to the end of suffering.

### 4. The work of Elkarri

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Elkarri is a plural and independent social movement that has been working for peace and dialogue in the Basque Country for ten years. It recently carried out its most ambitious project, "the Peace Conference". Over two years almost 100,000 people, and the majority of political parties and social players in the Basque Country, have taken part in this experience of dialogue. At the same time, it has been able to call on the international support of seven Nobel Prize Winners: John Hume, José Ramos Horta, Dalai Lama, Rigoberta Menchu, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Jose Saramago and Mairead Maguire.

Although it was not possible to bring about an agreement between all the political parties, the Balance of the Peace Conference has been very positive. In social terms, it set up a unprecedented support network for a peace process, and in political terms an experiment with an indirect methodology of communication was carried out, which proved valid for maintaining dialogue in an extremely adverse context. On an international level, important Human Rights organisation and specialist centres in the management and transformation of this type of conflicts have shown their willingness to work more closely with Elkarri in the future.

Over the next few months Elkarri will continue driving forward a sustainable programme of public mobilisation and participation. This will be done by looking for the widest possible social and political consensus. On the international scene, a proposal to drive a peace process that leads to a final solution will be presented to the European institutions. Governments and institutions with mediating experience and tradition will also be asked to help. And, finally, a group of ten international personalities who are willing to act as observers of the process will be presented and, as the case may be, take on facilitating roles.

## 5. What can I do to collaborate with alternative?

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### 5.1. Information

The best way of supporting peace process in the Basque Country is to keep up to date on what is happening and support initiatives in favour of non-violence and dialogue. We invite you to receive this newsletter and give us the e-mail addresses of other organisations that may be interested in accessing it. We look forward to receiving your comments, suggestions and criticisms.

### 5.2. Participation in the "International network of support for a peace process in the Basque Country"

Throughout 2003 Elkarri will organise an "International Network of support for a peace process in the Basque Country". The objective is that 100 international organisations should state their support for non-violence and dialogue as the method of transformation of the Basque conflict. The commitment of these organisations will be limited to receiving information on efforts towards peace, and to express their ideas and contributions if they consider this appropriate.

If you would like to receive more information on this network we invite you contact us at: [info@elkarri.org](mailto:info@elkarri.org)

### 5.3. Support for the activities of Elkarri

If, in addition to participating in this network, you wish to collaborate in the initiatives of elkarri you can find all the relevant information on our website.

## Annex I. Other organisations that may wish to receive the newsletter

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