

Spain's PM Derides Basque Autonomy Plan

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MADRID, Spain (AP) -- Spain's prime minister condemned an initiative by Basque lawmakers to make their region virtually independent, deriding it Monday as secessionist, unconstitutional and anomalous in a Europe seeking to become more united.

In his first public remarks concerning Thursday's passage of the plan by the Basque regional parliament, Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero said the initiative is doomed to failure when it reaches Parliament for debate, probably in a month or two.

``This proposal does not form part of the future of our country. This proposal is part of policies of the past," Zapatero told a news conference in Seville. ``The policy of the future is the integration and union of the peoples of Spain and Europe."

Zapatero said he would meet soon with the mastermind of the plan, Basque President Juan Jose Ibarretxe, but only to hear him out -- not to negotiate -- and to tell him firmly that the government rejects his blueprint.

``The Basque president knows well that this plan will not succeed," Zapatero told a news conference.

He also rejected appeals by the conservative Popular Party that the Socialist government immediately file a Constitutional Court lawsuit against the proposal. That would freeze the initiative and prevent Parliament from even debating it.

Zapatero noted that the previous, conservative government had in fact filed a lawsuit with the Constitutional Court when the plan was first unveiled in 2003 - and lost. The court rejected the lawsuit on grounds that the plan at that point was just an idea, not a bill.

Instead, the government will consult with other parties opposed to the proposal, analyze it, weigh its legal options and gear up for parliamentary debate, after which the plan will be voted down, Zapatero said.

``The government must not make any wrong moves," he said.

The plan was approved Thursday thanks to unexpected help from lawmakers accused of being close to the armed Basque separatist group ETA, blamed for

more than 800 deaths since the 1960s in its campaign for an independent homeland in territory straddling northern Spain and southwestern France. Those lawmakers had originally said the plan did not go far enough toward Basque independence.

It seeks to amend the 1979 charter that granted the Basque region broad autonomy and transform its status into that of a "free state" associated with Spain.

Like some other parts of Spain, the Basque region already has broad autonomy, with control over its police force, schools, health care and other public services. The Basque region is the only one to collect its own tax revenue.

But Ibarretxe's plan seeks to give the wealthy northern region even more say in its affairs, such as establishing its own court system and representation in international bodies like the European Union.