

Spanish Leader Rebuffs Basque

Autonomy Plan Called Illegal

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MADRID, Jan. 13 -- The president of the Basque regional government came to Madrid Thursday to offer a "hand in negotiation" on his sovereignty proposal, but Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero rejected the offer and warned that the plan violated the Spanish constitution.

In a 3 1/2-hour meeting, Zapatero told Basque leader Juan Jose Ibarretxe to withdraw his plan, known as the Pact for Free Association with the Spanish state, which would transfer such powers to the regional government as issuance of identity cards and regulation of borders, according to accounts of the talks. The pact is widely seen as a step toward secession, which the constitution prohibits.

The Basque parliament approved the plan on Dec. 30 and has called for debate in the national parliament in March. Ibarretxe said that if it is rejected, as many analysts predict, he would hold a regional referendum. Under the constitution, only the national government can call such a vote.

"I would give the Basque people the chance to voice their opinion, and it would be they who would decide," he said during a news conference following the meeting. Spain's Basque region, home to the separatist group ETA, which has carried out bombings and assassinations over more than three decades, already has wide autonomy. Many people in the national government contend that any further transfer of powers would amount to independence.

Ibarretxe's threat to proceed with his plan has unleashed emotional debate in Spain. Supporters said it could take the wind out of ETA; critics in the national parliament and the news media counter that it could spell the dissolution of Spain.

Many of Spain's 17 regions want changes in their ties with Madrid, and some analysts say they will make new demands if the central government shows weakness with the Basques. Restive regions in other European countries could also be emboldened to escalate their pressure for change, these analysts contend.

"In a democracy, the rules are established," Spanish Vice President Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega said Thursday. "And there are even procedures for changing the rules. But outside the framework of the constitution, there is no place for a revision of the statute."

Zapatero has said he will use "the power of democracy" to defeat the plan, predicting a victory by his Socialist Party in regional Basque elections in May. Ibarretxe's Basque Nationalist Party has a majority in the regional government.

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