News & Comment

Give peace a chance in the Basque Country

Twenty months ago, the Basque Seperatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) abandoned its armed struggle in order to seek a political answer to the question of Basque self determination. The Spanish Government refused at the time and continues to refuse to engage with the peace process ETA attempted to begin. Meanwhile, over 600 Basque political prisoners – a startling number for any nation – remain isolated in prisons across Europe. Most are in Spain and France, six are in the UK, and almost all are being held outside the Basque Country as a result of Spain’s policy of dispersal.

Prisoners suffer from acute isolation, their family members having to make an average round trip of 1,300 kilometres just to visit them. Several of them are seriously ill. Two have recently died. Harassment, the use of solitary confinement, and medical neglect are said to be systematic and widespread. Many are still subject to de facto life imprisonment.

In this context, efforts are being made by lawyers, politicians and activists both from the Basque community and outside to highlight Spain’s intransigence and repeated human rights abuses.

On 16th April 2013 a public meeting was called by Campacc, supported by The Haldane Society and European Lawyers for Democracy and Human Rights (EDLH), Gorka Elejabarrieta, a representative of the Sortu International Department and former representative of the Abertzale Left in the European Parliament, said a broad consensus exists that this is a political conflict, that autonomy is not enough, and that the Basque people need to be given the right to determine their future freely. There is no political will on the part of France and Spain to engage with a peace process and the current situation is therefore unsurprising – however this will not stop the Basque people continuing to build trust and demonstrate their commitment to a democratic solution.

He said that the situation of political prisoners had to be brought to light and all prisoners released in order to enable any meaningful peace process. Humanitarian issues had to be addressed. Dispersal must end and the Spanish and French governments must no longer be permitted to hide behind ‘security’.

Asier Aranguren, a former political prisoner himself, spoke about the Collective of Basque Political Prisoners and their struggle to oppose unjust prison laws in the face of concerted efforts to stifle political discussions and prevent organisation. Despite enforced isolation, visitor restrictions, phone tapping, aggressive searches and dispersal across more than 90 prisons the Collective survives and continues its effort in the search for a democratic path to self determination.

Irratz Urtzaz, lawyer and member of the Basque Observatory for Human Rights, spoke about the attitude of the Spanish authorities and their efforts to bring in as many special measures as they could, justified by a purported ‘war on terror’. The European Arrest Warrant she said has been a huge boost to the Government who use it to seek extradition on the basis that European partners trust each other and don’t ask questions.

Alastair Lyon of Birnberg Peirce and Partners represents Basque prisoners in the UK in their fight against extradition. He spoke about the staggering level of denial on the part of the Spanish Government, disregard for medical authorities when presented with compelling evidence of torture. Despite hearing direct evidence of torture, from those prisoners brave enough to report mistreatment, and despite international human rights reports saying ‘this must end’, claims of torture were being ignored in Spain. Arrest, incommunicado detention, extracted confessions and torture continues while Spain remains a ‘trusted extradition partner’.

The struggle to establish engagement with the peace process continues. It is faced with indifference in the mainstream British press. However, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Conflict Issues met on 4th June 2013 to discuss civil society, peace and the Basque Country. The aim was to consider the outcome of a social forum that took place in the Basque country in March 2013 in Pamplona and Bilbao to promote civil society participation in the peace process. Further details can be found at www.usc.org/resources/event-basque-appeal-june

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2: A judge rules that a new inquest into how 96 people lost their lives at the Hillsborough football stadium in 1989 must be held in the north-west. Lord Justice Goldring decided that the inquest must be near to where the families live in order to allow as many of them to attend as possible and conveniently. A number of the families had argued that the inquest should be held in London.

9: In Chile, Jose Manuel Garcia Reyes and Hector Palomino Lopez are convicted of the murder of the British Roman Catholic priest Michael Woodward. The two served in the Chilean navy during Augusto Pinochet’s brutal coup 40 years ago. However, the whereabouts of Woodward’s remains have never been discovered.

9: In Uruguay a serving general is sentenced to 25 years imprisonment for human rights abuses. General Miguel Daia was a 23-year-old lieutenant during dictatorship-era Uruguay. His lawyer said he would appeal the verdict and called the evidence ‘invented’.

25: Newspapers reject a plan for press regulation agreed by the three main political parties following the Leveson Inquiry. The newspapers did not agree to a regulator underpinned by a Royal Charter and proposed their own suggestion. Critics said it was evidence the industry had not learnt anything from Leveson.