

12. November 2008, by Iker Bizkarguenaga

Conference about the Basque Country (Euskal Herria) in Brussels

Brussels hosts an event which criticizes police activities and demands a democratic process on Madrid

In the conference room A1G-3 of the European Parliament in Brussels, one could hear yesterday questions like: *"How can a settlement be found if a very important group of the Basque society is excluded?"*

The group **Basque Friendship (MEPs support group for a peace process in the Basque Country)**, was set up three years ago in the European Parliament with the aim of supporting and



Raymond Kendall and Brian Currin, members of the International Initiative for Peace and Dialog in the Basque Country

advancing the process of democratically resolving the conflict in Euskal Herria. Yesterday, they organized a successful event with Brian Currin and Raymond Kendall. Both men, speakers of high reputation, are members of the **International Initiative for Peace and Dialogue in the Basque Country**. They talked for nearly two and a half hours on the Basque political situation.

About a hundred people, Members of Parliament of different political affiliation and origin, deputies or staff members from all parliamentary groups, journalists from various countries, NGO staff, human rights lawyers and committee members of Euskal Herria solidarity groups, attended the event.

Bairbre de Brún, MEP (of the Irish party) Sinn Féin, and (vice president of the European Parliament) Gerard Onesta, elected to the European Parliament by Les Vert, the French Green party, moderated the event and introduced the two guests. They also gave their views on the subject. The first speaker after the presentation of the two hosts, was Brian Currin, a South African lawyer, who has first hand knowledge of the conflict in the North of Ireland and of the conflict in his own country. He concluded from his experience that there are some elements and procedures which are common in the resolution of both conflicts. And he advises that, beyond the differences that may exist, these procedures (of conflict resolution) should be applied to other scenarios, as for example to Euskal Herria (the Basque Country).

After the introductory remarks he applied them to the current discussion with a reference to both processes, the South African as well as the one in the North of Ireland: *"All agreed that all parties should participate freely and on equal terms."* A view completely contrary to what is happening in our country, where *"Batasuna, the left independence movement, is completely excluded from the democratic process."* Currin wonders: *"How can there be a peace process if such an important group is excluded from the process?"* And he replies himself: *"This is impossible."*

Therefore, he stressed repeatedly the importance of the *Izquierda Abertzale (the left independence movement)* being able to participate in the political game without constraints. He illustrates to the

audience the consequences of the (contentious Spanish) Parties Law (which is the legal base for the illegalization and thus the exclusion of Batasuna and which was changed in 2002 to meet these criteria). He further noted that *"Batasuna's leadership is committed to a peace process, to a democratic process, but that does not seem to be enough for the Spanish Government."*

Currin complained about the Spanish Authorities, who have "boycotted" their group since its formation and have refused to meet them. He also talked about the importance of the conflict related legislation, which exists in the Spanish state. He stressed, that in South Africa at the beginning of the 90s, even without an ongoing peace process, the government released numerous prisoners and legalized outlawed parties. Sinn Féin in Ireland could participate in the process as equals. But the attitude of the Spanish authorities is totally different. Thus, he highlighted the *"very severe legislation"* and made references to topics such as *"incommunicado arrest"*, i.e. solitary confinement (without any contact to the outer world for up to 5 days) which applies to detainees (arrested under the assumption of "terrorist" offences), and torture, reported by multiple agencies, most recently by the Human Rights Committee of the UN.

The lawyer also highlighted the case against (the current First Minister of the CAV, the Basque Autonomous Community,) Juan Jose Ibarretxe, two members of the PSE and several interlocutors of the independence movement. They are charged for dialog (because of the inclusion of Batasuna). He concluded, that *"it is everyone's responsibility to find a solution."*

«I think this is incredible!»

The next speaker after Currin was Raymond Kendall. With 75 years he is already retired, but he was Secretary-General of Interpol for several years, and also had other charges. From his perspective, he approaches issues differently compared to Currin, but from the background of his former experience his assessment of the police forces and the Spanish judiciary was especially notable. *"No one can approve a scenario where lawyers are not allowed to be present from the moment of the arrest, the lawyers must have access to their clients,"* he confirmed in relation to the *"incommunicado-arrests"* applied to detainees. He also referred to the closure of newspapers, the outlawing of parties, and the demand to repatriate Basque prisoners (from Spanish and French gaols back to gaols in the Basque Country).

"All agencies, all reports agree on these issues, and they bring their views to the attention of the Spanish Government, but the Government ignores all critics. And I think this is incredible! I do not understand, why they do not change anything," Kendall concluded this part of his statement. At the end of his speech, however, he tries to find an explanation and argues, that *"the Spanish Authorities may have a different legal culture. Spain is a relatively new democracy, and some judges still adopt some old fashioned, Franco like attitudes. I wonder if ignoring these human rights questions is not part of this legal culture."* The former most senior representative of Interpol took a firm stand on these issues in front of representatives of all parliamentary groups (of the European Parliament).

Before the conference came to an end there were many questions, from parliamentarians as well as from representatives of other organisations in attendance. The event concluded with a long applause. The magazine which had been published by the Basque Friendship group as background information for this conference was well received.

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Contact: Uschi Grandel, uschi@info-nordirland.de , <http://www.info-nordirland.de/> see background Basque conflict

Translation: Uschi Grandel, explanation in brackets. Original version (Spanish) in the Basque newspaper GARA:
<http://www.gara.net/paperezkoa/20081112/106120/es/Bruselas-acoge-acto-que-censura-via-policia-pide-Madrid-proceso-democratico>