

BASQUE NEWS

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During his meeting with Edwin Tafel, President of Baden Württemberg, the Lehendakari presented him with the traditional "makila".

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Ibarretxe strengthened the bonds of friendship and cooperation between the Basque Country and Baden-Württemberg and visited the Mercedes automobile consortium in Stuttgart

Stateless nations are indispensable for bringing Europe closer to its citizens

During his visit to Stuttgart, the richest Länd in the German Federal Republic, the Lehendakari argued that the stateless nations of Europe should be able to choose their representatives within their own electoral district as a means of bringing the institutions of the European Union closer to their inhabitants.

Juan José Ibarretxe made this statement after his meeting with the President of Baden-Württemberg, Edwin Tafel, and the President of the Parliament of this Länd, Peter Straub who, moreover, is President of the Committee of the European Regions. Both agreed with the Lehendakari that bringing Community institutions closer to the citizens of Europe is a priority issue and that having their own electoral districts is indispensable

in order to achieve this. Ibarretxe travelled to Germany some days after the European elections in which an abstention rate of 54% was recorded.

According to the Lehendakari, "Europe is suffering from the wide divide that exists between its citizens and institutions" and he added that "we must all work in order to bring Europe closer to its citizens". Ibarretxe argued that stateless nations such as the Basque Country, the German Länder, Scotland and Tuscany should be treated as independent electoral districts at the next European elections as "it is important for citizens to know who is to represent them".

Peter Straub agreed with the Lehendakari in that stateless nations in Europe are "go-betweens" between

society and the institutions of the Union and highlighted the "negative results of the elections, a symptom that Brussels is very distant from the citizens of Europe".

"I will do everything possible to defend the interests of the regions and cities before the European Union in order to make Europe more democratic", declared Straub as President of the Committee of European Regions. Ibarretxe then alluded to "the need for the presence of regions in Europe and to take part the process of European construction" and maintained that "we, the nations and regions of Europe are the true allies of the European Union and we have the capability of counteracting the wide divide that exists between European institutions and all the inhabitants of Europe. ➔

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Only a more relevant role for nations and regions can bring the citizens of Europe closer to their institutions".

The Lehendakari thanked the President of Baden-Württemberg, Edwin Taufel, for the respect he has shown for the Basque People, because "this involves recognising that Euskal Herria is the oldest people in Europe". Teufel recalled that "the Basque People have suffered a number of setbacks over the last 2000 years but have conserved their identity, their culture and their language, the oldest in Europe". The atmosphere of brotherhood between both peoples led to one newspaper describing the meeting in the following manner: "the authorities of Baden-Württemberg give Ibarretxe a splendid reception during his stay in Stuttgart".

The trip to this German Länd also included a visit by the Lehendakari, who was accompanied by the Industry Minister of the Basque Government, Ana Agirre, to the largest vehicle-manufacturing consortium in Germany. Mercedes' Sindelfingen plant is an impressive car-manufacturing facility employing 42,000 workers. For more than 20 years, this multinational company has had a plant in Vitoria where it manufactures people carriers. The Lehendakari's trip concluded with a visit to the company Beru, which also has production facility in Vitoria where it manufactures heaters for diesel engines. The Minister of Industry's schedule in Germany was extended a few days more in order to be able to attend Basque Week in Munich, where Basque gastronomy and culture were the main focus of attention.

Since it was inaugurated four years ago....

The economic impact of the Kursaal is valued at 95 million euros

The economic impact generated by the Kursaal Conference Centre in San Sebastián since its inauguration is estimated at 95 million euros. These economic results as well as the level of popularity that the building designed by Rafael Moneo (two enormous glass cubes) has had among the inhabitants of San Sebastián and the province of Gipuzkoa in general, has exceeded even the most optimistic forecasts of its promoters.

Since it was inaugurated on June 3 1999, more than 2 million people have taken part in the 1265 events that have been held at the Kursaal, most of them being included within the meetings category (conferences, conventions, trade fairs). This popularity has placed San Sebastián among the top four capitals in the ranking of cities with the largest number of participants at this kind of event. Moreover, the Conference Centre employs around 140 people, including its permanent staff and the personnel of the service companies it subcontracts.

While the economic data provide eloquent proof of the success of this venture, the Kursaal's high level of popularity among the inhabitants of the city has finally silenced its critics and put to rest any misgivings that might have existed when the building was inaugurated. The survey carried out by the Institute of Markets and Strategic Marketing Research reveals that 86% of the inhabitants of people, consider that the concepts and culture activities organised at the Kursaal (including such prestigious events as the International Film Festival, the Music Fortnight and the Jazz Festival) are very beneficial and 80% have a very favourable opinion of the conferences and meetings it organises. Moreover, eight out of every ten persons interviewed recognise the benefits that the activities of the Kursaal represent for the economy of Gipuzkoa, and more than half of them have attended one of the events organised by this Centre.

In brief

- **Luxury cruise liners dock in Bilbao.** The Port of Bilbao has become an obligatory port of call for the most luxurious cruise liners thanks to the boom in the tourist trade in Bilbao over the last few years, due mainly to the major remodelling work undertaken in the city centre. The port expects to receive a total of 22 cruise liners over the year, a record figure, which only goes to prove the great attraction that Bilbao and the Basque Country have in general for foreign tourists.
- **Basque-made furnishings for Bangkok airport.** The Basque company Akaba has been chosen to design the seats to be placed in the new airport in Bangkok, which is set to be the largest in the world and handle the highest amount of air traffic. The company, specialised in furnishings for large communities, has just signed an agreement with a Thai industrial group to manufacture a total of 20,000 seats designed by the Basque company. Throughout its history, the company has received a large number of awards including the Prince Felipe Award for Excellence and the National Design Prize. Moreover, the Royal Opera House in London and Sydney airport also have furniture designed by this Gipuzkoa-based company.
- **CAF clinches the largest contract in its history.** The railway company, CAF, has clinched the largest order for metropolitan railway coaches in Europe and the second largest in the world. This Gipuzkoa-based company leads a consortium of constructors that includes the Canadian company Bombardier and the German Siemens, who have won a tender to build 446 coaches for the Madrid Metro, with a total value of almost 646 million euros, of which 80% correspond to the coaches to be supplied by CAF. The contract signed with the Madrid Metro is the largest ever awarded to this Basque company, which continues to increase its order books, now valued at 2800 million euros.



Almost 50% of Basque students opt for vocational training courses.

The Basque Government is putting the final touches to its 2nd Vocational Training Plan

A new high-technology test bed is to be created in Rentería

The Basque Government is putting the final touches to its 2nd Basque Vocational Training Plan, for the period 2004-2007, representing an investment of more than 800 million euros. Aware of the importance of vocational training within the Basque industrial fabric, and of the fact that this educational option is chosen by 47% of Basque students, officials from the Education Department have drawn up an ambitious plan for the next four years, in which the aim is to promote new classroom technologies, train specialised teachers and lead innovation processes.

To do this, a large vocational training centre, which will be a reference model for education centres that wish to develop new projects,

is planned for the end of this year. This new centre will be set up in the old vocational training Institute of Rentería and will become a kind of test bed for the latest technologies so that teachers can obtain hands-on experience handling the latest machinery before installing these in Institutes for teaching purposes.

Moreover, the text of the 2nd Basque Vocational Training Plan includes two novel items: Greater pedagogic and management autonomy for teaching Institutes so that they can adapt to the industrial environment, and the creation of a network between all the centres that collaborate in this scheme so that they can share teaching techniques and experiences.

San Sebastián will become a pioneering centre in mother cell research

San Sebastián will soon have a mother cell research laboratory to be headed by the scientist, Juan Carlos Izpisúa, considered to be a world authority on the biology of development and regenerative medicine. This project has the support of Basque institutions and forms part of a plan for the period up to 2010 which seeks to convert the capital of Gipuzkoa into a reference model for sectors such as biotechnology, innovation and culture.

More specifically, Professor Izpisúa will direct a very ambitious project, which in some aspects has no equal anywhere in the world. The aim is to research and experiment on the genes and chemical compounds of zebra fish and mother cells that will allow medicines to be manufactured for all kinds of illnesses. In this case, the research will centre upon cardiovascular diseases, which are a source of major concern in western society.

Only 43 years of age, Juan Carlos Izpisúa is already a world authority on the research into mechanisms of regeneration of tissues and organs in vertebrates. For the last 11 years, he has directed the Genetic Expression laboratory of the Salk Institute in California where he has conducted a research programme that has awakened the interest of specialists all around the world.

The Basque Country among the leading nations in terms of Science and Technology graduates

The Basque Country has one of the highest percentages of science and technology graduates in Europe. This is according to a survey presented by the Ministry of Education of the Basque Government that indicates that 12.1% of persons between the ages of 20 and 29, resident in the Basque Country, have university degrees in science and technology, compared to the European average that stands at 9.3%.

The survey also reveals that the Autonomous Basque Community has the highest percentage of students who complete post-obligatory secondary education, which includes secondary education or higher vocational training qualifications. Finally, the student dropout rate is also lower than in Europe as a whole.

Vitoria inaugurates a free bicycle hire service

This original free bicycle hire service started in July

A pioneering experiment at a state level has just been put into motion in Vitoria. The aim of the free hire system is to encourage people to use bicycles as a means of transport in the city. To do this, the Town Hall has made a total of 200 bicycles available to users. These are distributed at nine different points in the city, and can be hired free of charge.

This service was put into motion in mid-July and will end in December. If the results of this experiment are encouraging, the organisers of this initiative will consider whether it is to be continued, as well as the possibility of increasing the number of bicycles. Users can hire a bicycle in one location and leave it at another. To hire a bicycle, users must present their ID card or passport, and they will be given the option of using the

bicycle all day, up to nine o'clock at night. Besides enabling users to go about their business within the city, this initiative also provides the public with the possibility of using the ten urban cycle paths that run through the main districts of the city, as well as a number of cycle tracks that have been built in the green areas around the outskirts of Vitoria. These bicycles are simple, sturdy and functional and are equipped with a basket on the handlebars. They are painted orange, the colour of their sponsor: the Basque telephone company Euskaltel, also sponsor of the cycle team that bears the same name. This experiment will place Vitoria on a par with other modern European cities such as Copenhagen, where this novel system of free bicycle rental is already in operation.



Vice Lehendakari inaugurates an official delegation in Chile

Chile now has an official delegation of the Basque Country. Taking advantage of her official visit to Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, the Deputy Lehendakari, Idoia Zenarruzabeitia, has inaugurated the new office of the Basque Country in the capital, Santiago. After Brussels and Mexico, this is the third delegation of the Basque Government to be established abroad. Its functions will include attending to the growing trading interests of the Basque Country in Chile, where a total 32 Basque companies have been established, some of them with their own production plants as is the case of Elecnor, Iparlat and Santa Ana de Bolueta.

The Basque country will introduce electronic voting systems at the next Autonomous Community elections

The next Autonomous Community elections will be an acid test to verify the efficiency and security of a new electronic voting system that is to be introduced gradually within the Basque Autonomous Community. The system, called Demotek, was presented recently by the Minister of the Interior, Javier Balza, who says that the new method is "simple, reliable and secure, as it guarantees the secrecy and confidentiality of votes cast and maintains the privacy of the traditional procedure". Moreover, as the Minister explained, the political parties and coalitions that contest the next Autonomous Community elections (to be held presumably in the spring of 2005), will be able to continue distributing their election pamphlets as they have done in the past.

Demotek ballot boxes are similar to the traditional ones and are provided with a device that reads the information contained on each ballot paper when this is inserted into the box. Ballot papers do not require an envelope as they are folded in half and sealed. Even when sealed, voters can check their vote thanks to an ultraviolet reader. When the polling stations close, votes are counted immediately as this is done electronically. The voting results centre also receives details of the votes cast in each polling station immediately as ballot boxes are connected directly with this centre.

The new system, which has already been used successfully at the last elections for the Dean of the University of the Basque Country, will reduce vote-counting times to guarantee maximum accuracy.

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