



Zapatero: “No one can dispose of human life, not even States”

The president of the Spanish government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, will take part in the opening of the World Congress Against the Death Penalty. He has made the abolition of capital punishment a key objective of his foreign policy and of the Spanish presidency of the European Union. He details his commitment.

Why did the Spanish government decide to support the abolition of the death penalty as part of its foreign policy?

One of my government’s priorities has been the extended protection of human rights. As requested by the United Nations’ human rights bodies, we adopted a National plan for human rights as part of our foreign policy in December 2008. We included the fight for the abolition of the death penalty in that plan.

Today, we see that a growing number of countries are in favour of abolition. We must support and encourage them. The Spanish presidency of the EU gives us visibility and an opportunity that can be leveraged for efficiency in this struggle. I feel personally involved in this struggle.

What are the concrete steps Spain will take on this issue? For instance, what will be the role of the “International commission against the death penalty” that you announced and how will it work? How are you planning to work to achieve a global moratorium in 2015?

The National Plan for Human Rights provides for the creation of an International commission against the death penalty, which will contribute to the international community’s efforts for a global moratorium as a first step towards total and effective abolition of the death penalty worldwide.

We think it is necessary to adopt a gradual and pragmatic approach to achieve such total abolition. That is why we have put forward the idea of a global moratorium by 2015.

During the first half of 2010, we will be taking advantage of Spain’s presidency of the European Union to promote this objective, especially through EU demarches towards relevant authorities when the conditions for intervention are met; or within the framework of the direct dialogue on human rights established between the EU and more than ten countries. It is also important to mention the coordination and promotion of initiatives taken by EU member states towards the United Nations. All those actions are part of the EU guidelines on human rights in relation to the death penalty.

Moreover, we have been conducting discreet and persistent diplomatic efforts that have led to some results, such as the abolition of the death penalty in Togo, similar draft legislation in Benin and the introduction of this issue in all bilateral contacts established by Spain.

We have appointed an ambassador as special co-ordinator against the death penalty, whose mission is to pursue all these objectives. The International Commission, which is currently being formed, will naturally join these efforts. The Commission will work to sensitise public opinion with help from the reputation of its prestigious members.

How can the action of government such as yours and that of other actors (international organisations, civil society) be co-ordinated?

From the beginning, we have been associating civil society and international organisations – chiefly the United Nations – with our efforts. We have been maintaining regular communication with specialist NGOs, and our diplomatic work has involved the co-ordination of our actions through human rights working groups, whether at the EU or UN level.

For example, the first meeting of EU Council's human rights working group (COHOM) held under the Spanish presidency essentially focused on the death penalty and heard representatives from the Community of Sant'Egidio, Amnesty International and the director of Together Against the Death Penalty as guests. In fact, we have been in permanent contact with those organisations. We also take part in major meetings and conferences, such as the 4th World Congress. And we are "Friends of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" (a campaign in favour of the UN Protocol on the abolition of the death penalty led by the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty). Finally, in all these areas, we regularly exchange information with stakeholders – not only with the organisations mentioned above, but also with other key contacts and other States.

What can you answer to the countries that reject recommendations from abolitionist governments and international organisations, arguing that the death penalty is an issue of national sovereignty?

It is true that international law does not ban the use of the death penalty, except in the cases of juveniles, pregnant women and the mentally ill. However, nobody can minimise the universal scope of human rights, especially the right to life, on which all other rights are based.

The death penalty is not an efficient punishment and its irremediable application makes judicial errors irreparable. Most importantly, no one can dispose of human life, not even States.

What message are you going to deliver to the participants to the World Congress Against the Death Penalty?

Spain's commitment and my personal one to the promotion and the protection of human rights, especially with regard to life and the integrity of human beings; and to the fight for the universal abolition of the death penalty by all means available to us, as part of a global strategy.