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US, Montenegro sign defense, troop immunity pacts
Agence France Presse

WASHINGTON, May 1 – The United States signed a defense pact Tuesday with Montenegro that could open the way for the deployment of US forces to the young Balkan republic -- a step likely to fuel tensions with Russia.

The Status of Forces Agreement was signed by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Montenegrin President Filip Vujanovic, who was making his first official visit to Washington since his nation broke from Serbia and gained independence in 2006.

Rice said the agreement "establishes a basis for United States military personnel to operate in Montenegro for mutually agreed activities."

"Mr. President, we share your aspirations for a Euro-Atlantic future for Montenegro and the United States and Montenegro are working towards that goal," she said during a joint press conference with Vujanovic.

The State Department revealed Monday that the two governments had also signed last month a so-called "Article 98" agreement, a controversial bilateral immunity deal that would shield US troops and nationals stationed in Montenegro from possible prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The United States has signed Article 98 agreements with more than 100 countries despite questions about the international legality of the pacts.

Vujanovic said he hoped the agreement with the United States would enhance his country's image as a "safe environment" for foreign investment.

Montenegro broke away from an alliance with Serbia following a referendum vote for independence in May 2006.

The prospect of US troops deploying to the Balkan nation is likely to add fuel to a growing dispute with Russia over the expansion of NATO into former Soviet bloc countries in eastern Europe and bilateral deals placing US forces in the region.

Russia President Vladimir Putin announced last week that Moscow was suspending its compliance with a key East-West treaty on conventional forces in Europe in protest at the moves and at US plans to station anti-missile interceptor bases in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also lashed out at his NATO counterparts over the alliance's expansion during a meeting Thursday in Oslo.