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**WORLD CRIMINAL COURT IS RATIFIED; PRAISED BY U.N., OPPOSED BY U.S.**

UNITED NATIONS, April 11 — The world's first permanent criminal court for the prosecution of dictators and war criminals became a reality today, more than half a century after such a tribunal was first proposed in the ruins of World War II.

"The long-held dream of the International Criminal Court will now be realized," Secretary General Kofi Annan said. "Impunity has been dealt a decisive blow."

The court, which is strongly opposed by the White House, closes a gap in international law by holding individuals, not nations or armies, responsible for the most horrific crimes, Mr. Annan declared. He was speaking at a news conference in Rome, where more than 100 countries met in 1998 to propose the establishment of the tribunal.

The court is expected to take shape in The Hague over the next year, beside the International Court of Justice, known as the World Court, which rules in disputes between nations.

The establishment of the International Criminal Court, which will assume jurisdiction over genocide and war crimes cases beginning on July 1, has been broadly welcomed by most democratic nations, American lawyers' associations and human rights groups.

But it has an implacable foe in the Bush administration, which appears to be on the verge of not only renouncing the tribunal but also removing the signature of the United States from the treaty creating it.

The treaty, administration officials say, will never be sent to the Senate for ratification. Congress has already passed a law forbidding Americans at all levels of government from cooperating with it.

Michael Posner, executive director of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, said in an interview that unsigned the treaty would set a terrible precedent.

"No American president in 200 years has unsigned a treaty, as far as we can find," he said. "It would also send a signal to other governments around the world that treaties they signed are un-signable."

Arms control advocates fear that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, barring nuclear explosions, may be next in line. The treaty was signed by the Clinton administration in 1996 and rejected by the Senate in 1999.

The International Criminal Court, created to try individuals accused of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity officially came to life in a ceremony here this morning when 10 nations

deposited their ratifications, pushing the necessary number to 66. A total of 60 ratifications were required.

"A page in the history of humankind is being turned," said Hans Corell, a Swedish judge and international lawyer and the United Nations' top legal officer, who accepted the 10 ratifications.

International law groups and human rights organizations say that American opposition to the court, not all of it from Republicans, has been successful in portraying it as a danger to American sovereignty and a threat to American officials and troops because there is so little known about the tribunal in the United States.

Richard Dicker, director of international legal programs at Human Rights Watch, said: "There has been such an active disinformation campaign about this court, and those who are behind this enjoy a real advantage in that they are describing an institution that does not yet exist.

"What they have done is describe it in the most nightmarish terms, with all kinds of scenarios of innocent Americans being persecuted by individuals from governments that are actively hostile to the United States."

He added: "It will be much harder to do that when we will run up against the reality of this institution that will be staffed by judges from the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, South Africa, Senegal, Argentina — states that are committed to the rule of law," he said.

Secretary General Annan tried to assuage American fears today.

"The court will prosecute in situations where the country concerned is either unable or unwilling to prosecute," he said.

"Countries with good judicial systems, who apply the rule of law, and prosecute criminals and do it promptly and fairly, need not fear. It is where they fail that the court steps in."

He said that functioning legal systems need not worry. "I don't think this a court that is going to run amok," he said.