

COLOMBIA TURNS DOWN US REQUEST FOR DEAL ON INT'L COURT

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BOGOTA, Aug. 21 (Xinhua) --Colombia on Wednesday turned down a US request for a bilateral agreement seeking immunity for its peacekeepers before the newly-formed International Criminal Court (ICC).

Vice Foreign Minister Clemencia Forero said Colombia, which signed the statute of the ICC in 1998, would remain firm to abide by it. Clemencia Forero was responding to a US request made last week by US undersecretary of state for political affairs Marc Grossman that Colombia signs a bilateral agreement with the US to exempt US soldiers from prosecution in the ICC. The vice foreign minister said: "We respect the US decision not to take part in the ICC and we also look forward to US respect for Colombia's decision on the issue."

Also on Wednesday, Colombian Foreign Minister Carolina Barco said Colombia is analyzing the US request and any decision to be taken must respect the interests of the country. The foreign minister also said the United States has asked several other Latin American countries to sign such a treaty.

The ICC aims to bring to justice those suspected of war crimes and genocide committed after July 1, 2002. The legal framework of the court was drawn up at a special UN conference in 1998, when 139 nations signed the statute for the ICC.

As more than 70 signatories have ratified the treaty, which exceeds the minimum 60 countries required for its effectiveness, the court went into operation on July 1 this year and is prepared to take up legal cases from January 2003.

Although a strong advocate for the establishment of the ICC at the beginning, the United States backtracked for the sake of its own national interests. In fact, the Clinton administration signed the statute of the ICC in 2000, but the Bush administration has refused to recognize the legitimacy of the court.

The United States has declined to ratify the treaty, saying that hostile nations might abuse its justice and bring politically motivated cases against Americans, notably US troops on peacekeeping missions around the world.

The UN Security Council reached a compromise and agreed to give US peacekeepers a year's exemption from the ICC after Washington threatened to withdraw peacekeepers from Bosnia on the eve of the ICC's birth. Since then, Washington has been trying to forge bilateral accords with various countries in order to evade the ICC.

To date, only Romania and Israel have concluded such pacts. The European Union, a strong critic of US unilateralism, is expected to hold a ministerial meeting next month to seek a coordinated position in response to the US demand.