

## **NATO HOPEFUL VOWS TO AID U.S. ON WORLD COURT; COMMITTS TO TALKS ON IMMUNITY FOR AMERICAN TROOPS**

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Romania, hoping to join NATO this year, yesterday became the first country to commit to negotiating a bilateral agreement with the United States that would grant immunity from the new International Criminal Court to U.S. peacekeepers on its territory.

The Bush administration, which earlier this month won a one-year exemption from prosecution of U.S. soldiers by the ICC, is seeking separate accords with the court's signatories to secure permanent immunity for U.S. personnel.

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and his deputy, Richard Armitage, "in their meetings have been raising these issues, and we are starting to get responses," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters. The Romanian position became clear after Mr. Armitage's meeting yesterday with visiting Foreign Minister Mircea Geoana. Mr. Armitage "expressed appreciation for Romania's willingness to negotiate a bilateral treaty," Mr. Boucher said.

After the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution granting the exemption two weeks ago, "we went out with instructions to all our embassies to approach other governments in key countries about negotiating" bilateral agreements, he said.

The Romanian ambassador to Washington, Sorin Ducaru, who took part in the meeting yesterday, said that when the U.S. message was received in the capital Bucharest, "we did an analysis and were able to respond in a positive manner."

He said an accord would be a "logical consequence" of an agreement that the United States and Romania signed in Washington in November on the permanent status of U.S. forces on Romanian territory. The presence of American troops there previously was legalized on a case-by-case basis.

The most recent mission of U.S. peacekeepers in Romania lasted two months and ended about six weeks ago, Mr. Ducaru said. They underwent training and adaptation to the region before joining the U.N. KFOR mission in Kosovo, he said.

The Bush administration, which opposes the ICC in fear of politically motivated prosecution of U.S. soldiers, failed to secure permanent immunity for them despite its threat to block the renewal of the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Although the State Department did not make a direct connection between Romania's stance on the ICC issue and its chances to get a NATO invitation at the alliance's Prague summit in November, U.S. officials have said that nothing remains without consequences.

For example, Bulgaria, another NATO hopeful, shrewdly used its turn as a rotating member of the Security Council to score valuable points with the United States. In the sea of hands raised to support extending the Bosnia mandate, only two were missing. The United States voted against, and Bulgaria conspicuously abstained.

"That vote didn't go unnoticed," a State Department official said. "It certainly doesn't hurt," he added, implying that Washington will remember the gesture as it gets closer to making up its mind on which of the nine applicant nations to support in Prague.

As many as seven former Soviet-bloc nations - Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia - are expected to be offered membership, five years after the first wave of NATO's post-Cold War enlargement. Albania and Macedonia are considered long shots.

The United States has not yet made an official decision on which countries to support, but President Bush has said he favors "more rather than less." Mr. Powell and other officials have called for a "robust" expansion.