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U.S. LINKS PEACEKEEPING TO IMMUNITY FROM NEW COURT

UNITED NATIONS, June 18 - Further toughening a stance that has irritated even its allies, the United States warned today that Americans would not take part in United Nations peacekeeping missions unless the Security Council granted them immunity from prosecution by a new global criminal court.

The warning by Richard S. Williamson, the United States representative to the United Nations for special political affairs, was made at a Security Council meeting on international forces in Bosnia, whose mandate comes up for renewal on Friday. "In the Security Council this morning, I said there should be no misunderstanding that if there is not adequate protection for U.S. peacekeepers, there will be no U.S. peacekeepers," Mr. Williamson said.

Diplomats said it was unlikely that the United States would actually block the extension of the Bosnia force, especially since that force is essentially a NATO operation with a United Nations endorsement.

But Mr. Williamson's warning was clearly intended to build pressure on the Security Council, and especially on Britain and France, to pass a resolution explicitly exempting United Nations peacekeepers from prosecution by the International Criminal Court before it comes into being on July 1. Mr. Williamson met this evening with the ambassadors of Britain and France, but no progress was reported.

Beyond the immediate implications of the threat, Washington's efforts to deny the International Criminal Court any jurisdiction over Americans serving abroad has become a symbol of what many diplomats and officials at the United Nations perceive as a challenge by the Bush administration to the very concept of a universal legal system.

Reports that the administration is preparing a military doctrine of pre-emptive armed intervention has intensified complaints that the United States perceives two sets of rules in the world, one for itself, and one for everybody else. "What member states find most irritating is this perennial argument that the United States is a special case, that rules are for everybody else," one diplomat said. "Even close friends are very, very nervous. This is really a serious assault on the international legal order."

For now, diplomats viewed the developing military doctrine as an irritant, not yet a threat. "The crassness slightly outweighs the scariness," one diplomat said dismissively.

But they noted that if it ever came into force, there would be a great danger of other countries following suit and claiming justification for attacking their enemies.

While supporters of the International Criminal Court see it as one of the most important developments in international law and human rights since World War II, the Bush administration and conservative Republicans in Congress see any such global tribunal as a threat to national sovereignty. They especially fear that Americans abroad could become subject to political prosecution.

Last May, the administration advised the United Nations that the United States no longer considered itself bound by President Clinton's signature on the treaty creating the International Criminal Court. Shortly afterward, Washington made a first, unsuccessful bid to have the Security Council exempt peacekeeping forces from prosecution by international tribunals.

With the approach of the actual creation of the court, the administration has redoubled its efforts. Despite a widespread reluctance among most United Nations members to get embroiled in yet another dispute with the United States, which seemed to grow warmer toward the United Nations after Sept. 11, the challenge to the International Criminal Court has generated strong resistance in the Security Council.

Though Western European diplomats were unwilling to speak on the record on an issue that is still unresolved, Britain and France have made it no secret that they are against any resolution curbing the reach of the new court. They, and all other members of the European Union, have ratified the treaty creating the court.

Diplomats said the issue was not the exposure of peacekeeping forces to prosecution, because the treaty was intended to make it highly unlikely that they would ever be brought before the court. The International Criminal Court would assume jurisdiction only if the responsible country did not.

"There is a pretty strong feeling in the European Union that nothing should damage the spirit and goals of the court," one diplomat said. "The damage of a Security Council resolution would be to the spirit of the court, rather than practical."

Other supporters of the International Criminal Court were more adamant. "They're on this ideological jihad against international justice, and in particular this court," said Richard Dicker of Human Rights Watch. "It's like a new Cuba policy - it's not productive, it will not yield the desired results, and it alienates our allies. They're burning bridges in front of them on the very issues where they like to pose as champions - human rights, rule of law."

American officials at the United Nations argued that their goal was to strengthen the organization's peacekeeping efforts by ensuring American participation despite Washington's strong aversion to the International Criminal Court.

Mr. Williamson said he disagreed with the notion that the current treaty offered sufficient protection to Americans overseas. "We think more protection is required for

American men and women involved in peacekeeping," he said. "You should err on the side of too much protection and not risk not enough."

The exact impact of an American refusal to take part in United Nations peacekeeping operations was not immediately clear. A relatively small number of Americans participate directly in United Nations forces or in policing or observer functions. About 1,000 serve in NATO forces in the Balkans with United Nations endorsement.