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US ACCUSED OF TRYING TO WRECK INTERNATIONAL CRIME COURT

THE AMERICAN government has been accused of trying to undermine the International Criminal Court because it wants prosecution immunity for its troops on UN missions in Bosnia and elsewhere.

The United Nations Security Council is engaged in intense lobbying and debate, behind the scenes, before the crucial vote on the American move, due in 48 hours. The two resolutions, introduced by Richard Williamson, the US ambassador to the UN for political affairs, want immunity from prosecution for troops on UN-supported and mandated missions. The first one deals specifically with the force in Bosnia and the second with UN operations as a whole.

The vote to continue the mandate for the United Nations force in Bosnia was meant to be taken last Friday. But because of the continuing row, the Security Council extended the deadline.

Diplomatic sources say the US administration has warned that a failure by the Security Council to pass the resolutions could lead to Washington drastically reducing its 27 per cent contribution to the UN's peace-keeping budget, as well as withdrawing its troops from international peace-keeping. The four other permanent members of the Security Council - Britain, France, China and Russia - have strongly opposed the US proposals.

But, Britain, in particular, is now under intense pressure to change its position, say sources in London and Washington. Last week, US officials leaked details of how the British Government had secured immunity from prosecution for British troops in Afghanistan, while criticising the US for refusing to join the ICC. Diplomats and civil rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch, believe stance could be pivotal in whether or not the US resolution goes through. A volte face by London is expected to have a domino effect, with France and non-permanent members of the Security Council softening their opposition.

The International Criminal Court, the world's first permanent war crimes tribunal, formally comes into effect on 1 July. The statute, which was adopted on 17 July 1998, has been signed by 139 states, and ratified by 69, including Britain. The US has been adamantly opposed to its nationals being subject to the court.

The US has indicated a desire to disengage from its only major peacekeeping commitments, in Bosnia and Kosovo, from the first days of the Bush administration, and there is vocal opposition among Republicans in Congress to American forces being involved in such peace-keeping duties.

Apart from the Balkans, where the international forces have devolved from Nato -led operations, approved by the UN, American involvement in other operations, actually initiated by the UN, has been limited. There are just 35 other members of the armed forces deployed in southern Lebanon, East Timor and Sierra Leone, and 712 police officers on training duties.

But the possibility of the US cutting of its share of the peace-keeping budget, which has already fallen from 32 per cent to 27 per cent has caused the most concern. Richard Dicker, director of the international justice programme of Human Rights Watch, said: "This is a very serious situation. What Britain does will be of huge importance."