

## US WARNED NOT TO RISK RIFT WITH EUROPE OVER TREATY

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The UK has warned the US not to risk a serious rift with nearly all of its European allies by undermining the International Criminal Court before it is ratified next month.

Jack Straw, the UK's foreign minister, has warned Colin Powell, his US counterpart, several times over the past few days that the US "does not want to be in a head-on clash with Europe", as one diplomat put it.

Diplomats say the Bush administration, which deeply opposes the world court, is expected to remove its signature from the treaty, which former president Bill Clinton signed on the last possible day: December 31 2000.

UN officials said the US had asked the organisation's legal department whether it could legally "unsign" the treaty and had been told that, under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, it had that right.

Though US officials have been tight-lipped about their approach, diplomats say several top-level members of the administration, including Donald Rumsfeld, US defence secretary, have lobbied President George W. Bush to go a step further and launch a campaign against the ICC.

The UN now expects to collect the final four ratifications it needs to establish the court by mid-April, months earlier than diplomats and US officials had expected just a few weeks ago. The court would then come into effect on July 1 and eventually be able to try individuals for war crimes or crimes against humanity after that date.

Nevertheless, diplomats fear the US could still undermine the process and seriously strain its relationship with European allies, many of whom have ratified the treaty. Fifty-six countries have handed in their ratifications.

"The US is trying to balance pandering to the rightwing and the fact that it is in a coalition," said one official of a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

The House international relations committee and the Senate foreign relations committee next week are expected to debate a bill that includes Republican Senator Jesse Helms' American Service-Members Protection Act. The legislation would prohibit any US co-operation with the ICC and threatens, among other things, a halt of US aid or military support to most countries that join the court.

However, lobbyists expect the legislation to be watered down if it passes at all.

The UN and NGOs that support the ICC are trying to avoid being trumped by the US by urging countries to ratify the treaty, which was negotiated in Rome in 1998, simultaneously on April 11.

Romania, Jordan, Cambodia, Niger, Greece, Latvia, Bulgaria and Bolivia were all close to handing in their ratifications, said one NGO official.

On April 11, Kofi Annan, the UN's secretary-general, would be in Rome and members of the ICC's preparatory committee would be in New York, making it an ideal date, diplomats said.