

EU NEARS DEAL ON NEW COURT

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The European Union has taken a step forward in its attempt to forge a common position over Washington's demands that US citizens should be granted immunity from prosecution before the new International Criminal Court (or ICC).

Top EU legal experts, meeting in Brussels, agreed that a request for blanket immunity for all Americans was unacceptable.

The EU is desperate to prevent this complex legal matter from escalating into an embarrassing political row. The row over the ICC has split the EU, with Italy and Britain hinting they could sign bilateral agreements with the US.

But there is hope a common stance could be achieved by the end of the month.

Meeting behind closed doors, top EU legal experts agreed on a set of conditions that could eventually allow European governments to sign bilateral deals with Washington.

Limited deals

First, they argue that the agreements should not lead to impunity and that people should be prosecuted by national courts if charged.

EU officials hope to accommodate US concerns

The experts also describe Washington's demand for blanket immunity for all Americans as unacceptable.

They would rather limit the scope of the deals to military personnel and officials.

And they suggest that any bilateral agreement should not be reciprocal, so that Europeans sought for genocide or serious war crimes would still be extradited by the US for prosecution before the ICC.

Consultations at UN

The EU is desperate to prevent this complex legal matter from escalating into an embarrassing political row, after Italy and Britain indicated they could go ahead with the bilateral deals if EU foreign ministers failed to reach a common position by the end of September.

On Friday, the compromise proposal will be examined by senior EU officials.

Consultations will then continue on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York, where EU foreign ministers will meet US Secretary of State Colin Powell and their colleagues from applicant countries.

Meanwhile, Canada, New Zealand and Switzerland, which also oppose the US request for immunity, want to raise the issue on Thursday in New York, where the governing body of the ICC has begun its first session to ensure the tribunal can begin operating next year.

The US withdrew its signature from the ICC treaty last May, saying it feared politically-motivated trials.

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