

US threatens aid cut in row over immunity from ICC

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The US Congress has launched a fresh attack on the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, threatening to cut off development aid to countries, including Ireland, which refuse to guarantee immunity from prosecution for Americans.

Washington has so far withheld about \$50 million in military aid to more than 30 countries which have refused to sign exemption deals.

These and more than 40 other countries have resisted US demands on the grounds that immunity deals would clash with their domestic laws and their international obligations.

The new provision, included in a budget bill likely to face a vote on December 8th, will increase pressure on non-complying countries by cutting off civil as well as military aid. It would stop disbursements from the State Department's \$2.5 billion Economic Support Fund, which is aimed at alleviating poverty.

The measure could jeopardise \$8.5 million intended for Ireland and aimed at bolstering the peace process in Northern Ireland. But it would affect mainly developing countries.

"This is money that would go towards HIV/AIDS prevention and education. It could make the ability of countries to resist this invasion of their national laws more difficult," said Mr William Pace, head of the Coalition for the International Criminal Court, a network of non-governmental organisations.

The measure was introduced by a Republican congressman from Washington state, Mr George Nethercutt, whose office did not return a call seeking comment yesterday.

The US claims that 96 countries have signed immunity pacts, although some have been kept secret at the request of signatories concerned about the reaction at home. Meanwhile, 97 countries have ratified the ICC Treaty.

The Department of Foreign Affairs confirmed last night that Ireland had not signed an agreement with the US guaranteeing immunity from the ICC and said that the Government supported the court.