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Ahern rules out delaying decision on EU voting rights

By Gideon Long

DUBLIN, Feb 13 (Reuters) - Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern said on Friday it was vital to solve a battle over European Union voting rights and agree an EU constitution before June elections but poured cold water on a potential compromise.

In an interview with Reuters, he said France and Germany - the EU's historic leaders - would not agree to postpone for years a decision on reforming the bloc's voting system to give greater weight to the biggest member states.

Ahern, who is leading the negotiations as current president of the 15-nation EU, said he sensed a greater willingness to reach a deal but key positions had not yet budged.

"It's difficult. It's a power and influence issue," he said.

He also said Finnish ex-Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen had joined Portugal's Antonio Vitorino, EU commissioner for justice and home affairs, as a formal candidate to succeed Romano Prodi as Commission president. EU leaders make a choice in June.

Ahern's first priority is to heal a fundamental rift over the allocation of power in the EU, a task he admitted would get harder if still unresolved by the summer.

The new constitution is designed to let the EU function after it expands to 25 members in May.

He indicated that the most popular idea among EU diplomats to break the logjam - delaying until 2008-9 the key decision on switching to a new voting system - was unlikely to succeed.

A summit to finalise the constitution collapsed in December when Spain and Poland refused to give up the so-called qualified majority voting system in the 2000 Nice Treaty which gave them power disproportionate to their population.

Most EU states support moving to a so-called double majority system whereby decisions would pass if backed by a majority of member states representing 60 percent of the population. That would give Germany, the most populous state, greater sway.

"On the voting rights, I don't think there's any trade-off," Ahern said. "The German and French positions are very clear that the principle has to be firmly established.

"It's no point saying the position is firmly established but it may change in a few years' time. They're not going to buy that."

Since Ahern took over the EU presidency in January, he has worked flat out to heal the rift before passing the EU baton to the Dutch in July. To little avail so far.

"They (the leaders) are prepared to try and find ways out," he said. "(But) we haven't done it yet."

Ahern said the main opponents, Poland and Spain, had shown a willingness to compromise, borne out on Thursday by Poland's public pledge to show flexibility.

Diplomats say Warsaw may be willing to agree that the EU should decide on qualified majority voting in 2008-9, a move likely to ensure Germany gets its way.

But he said time was tight to cut a deal, with European Parliament elections in June, national elections due soon in Spain and Greece, and a fierce fight over the next EU budget all set to cloud negotiations.

Asked when he saw the cut-off point for an Irish-brokered deal, Ahern said: "April, May - certainly by the European elections. There's a whole host of difficulties after that."

Revealing that Lipponen had entered the race to succeed Prodi, Ahern said others may follow.

"Lipponen is also in the ring. Lots of others (are) mentioned and not with authority," he said.

A government spokesman in Helsinki said: "He has not been officially nominated, but he has expressed his will to do this to the prime minister, and the prime minister is backing him."

Ahern said Portugal's Vitorino would find it hard to win support when Prodi steps down in November due to his leftist politics but called him a "very, very able commissioner".

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