



REUTERS

Bruton urges Irish PM to act now on EU charter

By Gideon Long

DUBLIN, Jan 9 (Reuters) - Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern should act now to resolve the European Union's crisis over its stalled constitution rather than letting it fester until later this year, an architect of the project said.

John Bruton, a former Irish prime minister, warned if Ahern failed to deal with the issue before March, it could get sidelined by other events during a busy European calendar.

"The problem is not going to get easier with the passage of time," he told Reuters in an interview.

"If it was possible to do it at the summit in Brussels last December - and I believe it was - then it's possible to do it by March," said Bruton, a former member of the European Convention's steering presidium.

The constitution has been on ice since December when the bloc's leaders failed to agree a charter in Brussels to help it expand later this year and integrate 10 new member states, eight of them poor ex-communist East European countries.

The project ground to a halt when Poland and Spain blocked plans to give bigger countries, led by Germany and France, more voting power to reflect their larger populations.

Ireland has said it will try to salvage the project during its six-month EU presidency, which began on January 1, but is loathe to let the issue overshadow its own presidential agenda.

But Bruton, prime minister last time Ireland held the EU presidency in 1996, said Ahern should grasp the nettle now.

Firstly, he said, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar was about to leave office and his successor would be less experienced in dealing with other EU leaders on the issue.

Spain goes to the polls in March.

Secondly, Bruton said the Irish were in a better position to break the impasse over the constitution than the Dutch, who assume the presidency in the second half of the year.

That is because the Netherlands has taken a hard line in negotiations over the EU budget, insisting - along with other major net contributors - that the bloc's budget for 2007-2013 be capped to 1.0 percent of Gross National Income.

"The Dutch presidency, while it's a very competent presidency, is not ideally suited to finding a compromise against the background of the budget negotiations," Bruton said. "They won't be seen as being a neutral broker. I think Ireland might be a better potential broker."

Bruton said it would be increasingly difficult to solve the constitutional crisis after March, when attention will turn to European Parliament elections in mid-June.

Ahern has said he will do all he can to find common ground on the charter and denies the issue has caused a rift between him and European Commission President Romano Prodi.

Prodi has repeatedly suggested some core EU countries might press on with further integration even if the bloc fails to clinch a deal on the constitution.

"I don't think Prodi and Ahern are necessarily disagreeing," Bruton said. "It's just that the two of them are talking about different things."

"Bertie Ahern is talking about what is desirable and Romano Prodi is talking about what might happen."

