



Deal on EU treaty is major feather in Ahern's cap

By Gideon Long

BRUSSELS, June 18 (Reuters) - In shepherding the European Union to a deal on its first constitution, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern has pulled off an audacious coup which will be remembered as a historic step forward for the continent.

It will go some way to restoring his battered standing at home following last week's poor European and local election results, and may even boost his chances of emerging as the next head of the European Commission, whether he likes it or not.

"This is a major, major success for the presidency," said Brigid Laffan, Professor of European Politics at the Dublin European Institute, an independent thinktank.

"It took a lot of careful and quiet diplomacy and a lot of listening. It's both a diplomatic triumph for the Irish and also a political one for Ahern."

Ireland, the holders of the EU's six-month rotating presidency, brokered a deal on the treaty late on Friday after exhaustive horse-trading at a summit in Brussels. If ratified, the constitution will serve as the 25-nation bloc's guiding document for the foreseeable future.

European Parliament President Pat Cox, another Irishman who might still be in with a chance to become Commission president, said: "This represents a victory for the quiet, patient and inclusive diplomacy and politics of the Irish presidency."

The Irish never wanted the job of brokering a deal, but were handed the poisoned chalice by the Italians, who failed to secure one at their end-of-presidency summit in December.

At first Ahern was cautious on his prospects. Meanwhile, his diplomats worked hard during the winter months to thaw frosty relations between EU leaders after a year in which Iraq split the bloc into those for and against the U.S.-led war.

One of the most significant turning points in the tortuous progress towards Friday's deal came not in the corridors of power in Dublin or Brussels, but on the train tracks of Madrid.

The al Qaeda bombings there on March 11 cast a long, dark shadow over the EU summit two weeks later in Brussels.

Suddenly it seemed absurd, even obscene, for Europe's leaders to be wrangling over the minutiae of the constitution while their citizens were being killed on the way to work.

The bombings also helped precipitate a change of government in Spain, one of two countries - the other was Poland - which objected to the draft constitution's rules on voting powers. That left the Poles isolated and, when the government in Warsaw changed hands too, the Irish EU presidency knew its chances of clinching a deal were improving.

But it is striking how late, deliberately, they left the key negotiations. Diplomats charged with working out the nuts and bolts of a deal did not meet under the Irish until May 4, and foreign ministers did not discuss it formally until May 17.

All the while, the emphasis was on consensus-building.

"They stayed at the preparatory stage for a long time while at the same time building up the political sentiment that would allow for agreement," Laffan said.

Even this week, Ireland left talks on the thorniest issues until the last minute, giving EU leaders only a limited time to scupper the deal. It was a high-risk strategy but it paid off.

If there is one cloud for Ahern inside the silver lining of Friday's deal, it is this: his success will enhance his standing in Europe to the point that he may find himself hoisted onto Romano Prodi's European Commission throne.

Ahern says he does not want Prodi's job when the Italian steps down in November, but, with talks on other candidates deadlocked, he may come under increasing pressure to take it.

© Reuters 2004