South Africa presents bill to quit global war crimes court

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South Africa’s justice minister presented a bill in parliament on Thursday to repeal the country’s membership of the International Criminal Court (ICC) - which the government has said clashes with diplomatic immunity laws.

Pretoria last year announced its intention to leave after the ICC criticised it for disregarding an order to arrest Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir during a visit to South Africa. Bashir faces charges of orchestrating genocide and war crimes - charges that he dismisses.

“At the end of this proceedings we will be tabling the notice of withdrawal that South Africa lodged with the secretary general of the United Nations,” Justice Minister Michael Masutha told legislators during a debate on the ICC.

Lawmakers from the official opposition Democratic Alliance party - which is planning to challenge the plan to leave the ICC in court - as well as the ultra-left Economic Freedom Fighters, opposed the bid to leave the Rome Statutes.

It was not clear when a final debate and vote would be held.

South Africa and Burundi have officially notified the United Nations of their intent to withdraw from the Rome Statute, the 1998 treaty establishing The Hague-based court. The withdrawals will take effect in October 2017.

The International Criminal Court, which opened in July 2002 and has 124 member states, is the first legal body with permanent international jurisdiction to prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

However, it has been criticised by African countries for having a bias against the continent, with most of its cases involving African leaders.

“For a long time we have witnessed the unevenness of international justice and the lack of universality of application in the manner in which countries are treated,” said parliament’s international relations committee in a statement welcoming South Africa’s plan to withdraw.