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Subject: Myanmar refugees seek Belgium trial for TotalFinaElf

BRUSSELS, May 8 (AFP) - Four refugees from Myanmar want the Belgian courts to put French oil group TotalFinaElf on trial for alleged complicity with their nation's military regime, human rights advocates said Wednesday.

Their case was filed in Brussels on April 25 under a 1993 law that gives Belgian courts the power to try human rights cases no matter where in the world the alleged outrages took place.

Investigating magistrate Damien Vandermeesch is reviewing their 78-page submission to determine its admissibility, said Michel Genet of Action Birmanie, a Belgian group that backs democracy activists in Myanmar.

His answer could be ready in a matter of weeks, Genet told AFP.

The plaintiffs -- former human rights activists in Burma now living as refugees in the United States, Britain, Germany and Belgium -- have hired two Belgian lawyers to handle their case.

TotalFinaElf, the world's fourth largest oil company, and British independent Premier Oil exploit gas fields in the Andaman Sea that power electrical general stations in Thailand via two parallel 60-kilometer (35-mile) pipelines that cut across southern Myanmar.

In the summary of their case, posted on the Internet by Action Birmanie, the four plaintiffs alleged that TotalFinaElf was aware that Myanmar's military regimes was "systematically" carrying out crimes against humanity.

They also claimed that TotalFinaElf provided "overall moral and financial support" to the regime, and that the company had "excellent knowledge" of the use of forced labor by "partners" responsible for pipeline security.

Besides the company itself, the submission named as co-respondents TotalFinaElf's chief executive Theierry Desmarest and Herve Madeo, director of its Myanmar exploration and production unit in 1992-99.

Belgium's so-called "law of universal competence" was the basis of a trial last year in which four Rwandans, two of them Roman Catholic nuns, were convicted for their role in the 1994 slaughter by Hutu extremists of upwards of one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Next Wednesday a court in Brussels is to hear new arguments on a case filed by Palestinians against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon over the 1982 massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon.

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