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(JOHANNESBURG)

IFP leader Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi told reporters here Monday night that he was disappointed the conference would not debate constitutional issues, on which the IFP is at odds with the ANC and to a lesser extent the government.

Only a propaganda campaign aimed at portraying the IFP as "spoilers" had stopped him insisting the conference would be more than just "rearranging the kitchen chairs," The Star daily quoted him as saying.

Buthelezi, primarily a regional leader whose support even in his Zulu powerbase has been questioned by pollsters, told supporters last weekend the conference should discuss his desire for a federal South Africa.

But Retief told AFP: "The government's position is that the conference is not constitutional talks, we're only trying to get constitutional talks going.

"It's a signal to political parties and participants that we are here together again. The emotional impact of that is quite important."

ANC spokesman Carl Niehaus said that although the ANC saw the conference as a technical meeting to arrange substantive multi-party talks, the broader participation would be important.

"We'll be getting a full and strong commitment from all parties," Niehaus said. "The CODESA-style talks once they are in session should be moving very fast," he added, to ensure a non-racial election is held by April next year.

"It's also an important signal we are sending to the South African community that negotiations are back on track."

The ANC was set for another session of bilateral talks with the government Wednesday to discuss substantive differences on power-sharing, regionalism and control of the state-run media during an election campaign, Niehaus said.

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