Israeli Government Vows to Fight Belgian War Crime Ruling

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Israel yesterday vowed to fight "with everything we have" a [ruling by Belgium's supreme court](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2003/02/13/wshar13.xml) that would allow the prime minister, Ariel Sharon, to be tried for war crimes after he leaves office.

The decision provoked outrage in Israel, with Mr Sharon's office calling it a "scandalous provocation". The chief rabbi, Yisrael Meir Lau, said it was outrageous coming from a nation that "closed its ears" to the Holocaust.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the foreign minister, summoned the Belgian ambassador, Wilfried Geens, for a dressing down. Mr Netanyahu said after the meeting: "What happened yesterday in Belgium is a calumny. A serious attack was launched against truth, justice and morality, as well as against the state of Israel and the fight against terrorism.

"We in Israel, and the Jewish people as a whole, have had enough of blood libels on the soil of Europe and we are going to fight this one with everything we have, politically and diplomatically."

In Belgium 23 survivors of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which Israeli-allied Christian Phalangist militiamen killed hundreds of Palestinians in Beirut, are trying to put Mr Sharon, who was defence minister at the time, [on trial for war crimes](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2001/07/06/wmid06.xml).

Mr Sharon was censured in 1983 by a government inquiry that ruled that he should have predicted that the Phalangists were likely to commit a massacre as they were incensed by the recent assassination of their leader, Bashir Gemayel. He was forced to resign as defence minister, but was never prosecuted.

Wednesday's ruling overturned a decision by a lower court last year that Mr Sharon could not be tried as he had never been in Belgium.

While Mr Sharon is safe as long as he remains in power, the ruling would open the way for trials of army officers who were in Lebanon at the time of the massacre.

Many Israelis fear that officers now serving in the Palestinian territories, where human rights organisations have accused the army of [violating the rules of war](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2002/05/04/wmid04.xml), could be similarly open to prosecution.

Meir Sheetrit, the Israeli justice minister, dismissed Belgium as a "small and insignificant nation" and said it had no right to put Mr Sharon on trial as due process had been served by the 1983 inquiry.