Belgium Delays Sharon Case Ruling

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A Belgian court has delayed a ruling on whether a war crimes probe can resume against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The court said on Wednesday it needed time to consider a ruling by the International Court of Justice that heads of government enjoy immunity.

The Israeli premier is among a string of past and present world leaders facing complaints before Belgian courts under laws introduced in 1993 and 1999 that allow for the prosecution of war crimes wherever they are committed.

A new hearing has now been set for May 15 on whether an investigation into Sharon by Belgian prosecutors could resume after it was suspended last September.

The lawyers for the 23 survivors of a 1982 massacre in two Palestinian refugee camps has asked the court to hold off on any decision until they introduce new arguments in light of the International Court of Justice ruling.

"It is a reopening of the debate," said Michael Verhaeghe, lawyer for the survivors. "There are very solid arguments."

Sharon's lawyers had been hoping the appeals court would throw out the case after the ruling on February 14 by by the world court in the Hague, Netherlands, on a similar war crimes case.

"We are talking about immunity. It is very clear for us," Irit Kohn, Sharon's lawyer and the director of the international department of the Israeli Department of Justice, told The Associated Press. "There is nothing unclear about the ruling of The Hague here."

The tribunal declared illegal an April 2000 international arrest warrant sought by Belgium, which wanted to try Congolese foreign minister Abdoulaye Yerodia Ndombasi over the killing of hundreds of minority Tutsis in 1998.

The court said he could not be tried in Belgium for allegedly urging the slaughter of Tutsis since he was foreign minister at the time.

The decision dealt a blow to Belgium's war crimes law, which enables anyone to bring a war crimes case against world leaders. About 40 similar claims now before Belgian courts were thrown into doubt.

Besides Sharon, criminal proceedings have also been brought against Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Cuban President Fidel Castro, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo and ex-President Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran among others.

Sharon was Israeli defence minister in 1982 when 800 Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Chatilla camps south of Beirut were slaughtered by a Lebanese Christian militia allied to the Israelis.

An Israeli inquiry into the massacre found Sharon indirectly responsible and he had to resign as defence minister. Yaron was also reprimanded and barred from field command positions for three years.

Magistrate Patrick Collignon opened his inquiry into Sharon in July after finding that the complaints warranted investigation.

If the appeals court decides to accept the case, Sharon could technically be arrested if he enters Belgium.