Sharon Halts Belgian Visit Fearing War Crime Arrest

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<http://www.fpp.co.uk/online/01/07/SMH030701.html>

THE Israeli Prime Minister, **Mr Ariel Sharon**, has cancelled a planned visit to Belgium this week after the Brussels State Prosecutor's office ruled he could be indicted on war crime charges.

The official explanation is that Mr Sharon, who is due to leave on Thursday, cannot visit because of a crowded schedule elsewhere in Europe, namely France and Germany.

But some Israeli officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Brussels prosecutor's decision meant "high-level dialogue between the two countries will have to take place outside of Belgian territory".

The decision of the Belgian State Prosecutor's office relates to the 1982 massacre of Palestinians in Lebanon by the Israeli-backed Christian Phalangist militiamen. An Israeli inquiry the following year recommended that Mr Sharon, then defence minister, should resign over the incident, which he did.

A lawyer for Mr Sharon dismissed the moves in Brussels as a political stunt. "We are very, very far from a court case," the lawyer, **Mr Dov Weisglas**, said.

"The Belgian court has not found anything. What happened is the complaint [by a Lebanese lawyer] ... was sent by the prosecutor-general to an investigating judge so he can open an investigation. Only if or when this investigation finds enough evidence for an indictment will an indictment be issued to a court."

However, Israeli Government officials appear to be taking the matter seriously. Last week, **Ms Irit Kahan**, head of the international affairs department at the Israeli State Prosecutor's Office, was sent to Belgium to compile a dossier of evidence that could be used in a possible indictment against Mr Sharon. Israeli Foreign Ministry officials are monitoring developments.

While the officials do not believe Belgium is going to issue an order for Mr Sharon's arrest and extradition, they concede that the issue is one of great public sensitivity following the handover of the former Yugoslav president, **Slobodan Milosevic**, to a United Nations war crimes tribunal.

"This is a very embarrassing, ugly topic and its not going to disappear soon," one Israeli official said.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry's top legal adviser, **Mr Alan Baker**, has noted recently the growing trend towards what he called "the globalisation of international humanitarian law".

Interest in the Lebanon massacre has been fuelled by a [BBC program broadcast](http://www.fpp.co.uk/online/01/06/BBCNews180601.html) on June 17, The Accused, which raised the question of whether Mr Sharon should be put on trial.

A day after the program was aired, a Lebanese lawyer, **Mr Chibli Mallat**, filed a complaint in Belgium on behalf of 23 Palestinians and Lebanese.

Belgian courts have been empowered by national legislation to prosecute foreign officials for violations of human rights committed outside Belgium.

Meanwhile, Syria yesterday condemned Israel's air raid on a Syrian military post in Lebanon and accused Mr Sharon of dragging the region towards war.