Barak and Olmert Among 14 Officials to Be Charged With War Crimes in Belgium

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Two Belgian lawyers announced yesterday they were intending to charge 14 Israeli political figures, including Ehud Olmert, Ehud Barak, Tzipi Livni and Matan Vilnai, with crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The charges will focus on alleged crimes committed during Operation Cast Lead in the winter of 2008-09, including the use of phosphorus, the lawyers said.

The lawyers, Georges-Henri Beauthier and Alexis Deswaef, said they were acting on behalf of 13 Palestinian victims from Gaza and a Belgian doctor of Palestinian origin named Anouar El Okka.

Belgian law requires the involvement of a Belgian citizen in a case entailing alleged offenses that took place outside the country, something El Okka provides.

This is not the first time the Belgian courts have been asked to charge Israelis with war crimes. Last year Belgian attorneys, acting on behalf of Belgian nationals with relatives who were wounded or killed in Gaza, asked a Belgian court to arrest then-foreign minister Tzipi Livni when she arrived in Brussels. However, in that case it seems the connection between the victims and Belgian citizens was not strong enough to follow through with the case.

The most famous such case dates to 2001, when a criminal complaint was filed in Belgium on behalf of 21 survivors of the 1982 massacre at the Shabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut. Ariel Sharon, who was defense minister at the time, was charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, as were some Lebanese Christians.

It was only after that case that Belgium changed the law to require the involvement of a Belgian national.

The Belgian charges were far from the only negative attention Israel has been getting in Europe this week.

In Strasbourg, France, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was expected to issue a condemnation of Israel's behavior over last month's flotilla raid and call for an independent international investigation.

Mehemet Kavasgholu, the council president and a Turkish citizen, told a Turkish newspaper last week that he would not only demand such an investigation but would also set up the investigation under the council's auspices. The council is authorized to set up such an investigation.

MK Yohanan Plesner, chair of the permanent Israeli delegation to the council, said yesterday that he and his team were hoping to avoid such an outcome.

"They will no doubt condemn Israel, but our goal is to ensure that an independent international inquiry is not established, and that the council makes do with the Israeli commission," he said.

Plesner said it was clear the mood in Europe was increasingly unfavorable to Israel.

"There is definitely a more critical mood and we see this mainly with our friends and allies, who are less willing to stand alongside us," he said. "And our foes are becoming more adept at exploiting the liberal discourse against Israel. ... So it's becoming less politically correct to support standing by Israel."

In Sweden, meanwhile, dockworkers launched a week-long boycott of cargo to and from Israel to protest the flotilla incident. About 1,500 members of the Swedish Dockworkers Union began the boycott yesterday across the country's ports, which handle more than 95 percent of Sweden's foreign trade.

Bjoern Borg, the dockworkers union's chairman, said they were calling for an international investigation into the May 31 raid and said Israel's recent easing of its Gaza blockade was insufficient.

"We don't think it is far-reaching enough," he said.