

Israel afraid of retribution for war crimes against Lebanon

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Three weeks after a cease-fire ended Israel's monthlong war against Hezbollah guerrillas, Israel is increasingly concerned that government officials and army officers traveling abroad could face war crimes charges related to the country's actions in Lebanon, officials said Monday.

A Foreign Ministry official said a special legal team is preparing to provide protection for officers and officials involved in the 34-day conflict in Lebanon.

More than 850 Lebanese were killed during the conflict, most of them civilians. The human rights group Amnesty International has accused Israel of war crimes, including indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian targets, AP reports.

Israel has said all of its actions were legal, and accused Hezbollah of hiding among civilians in Lebanon and deliberately targeting Israeli civilians in rocket attacks. The fighting left 159 Israelis dead, including 39 civilians hit by Hezbollah rockets in Israel's northern cities. The Amnesty report also criticized Hezbollah's attacks on civilians.

The Foreign Ministry official said the legal-defense team, which includes representatives from the Justice and Defense ministries, is maintained by the government to help officials facing the possibility of war crimes charges abroad. It was first put together to deal with charges related to Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza.

He would not comment on a report in the Haaretz daily that the ministry has urged top officials against making inflammatory statements that might be used against them in legal proceedings. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the matter with the media.

Israeli fears of prosecution abroad are based on experience. Arriving in London last year, Doron Almog, a retired general who had commanded Israeli forces in Gaza, was tipped off by an Israeli diplomat that he was about to be arrested by British authorities over a 2002 airstrike that killed a Hamas leader and 14 others, nine of them children. Almog remained on the plane and returned to Israel.

In 2001, then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon faced a lawsuit in Belgium over his alleged role in a 1982 massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut. Several former Israeli army chiefs of staff have also been targeted. None of the cases have succeeded.

Daniel Machover, a British attorney involved in attempts to prosecute Israeli officers, including Almog, said he knew of "at least two" teams compiling evidence in Lebanon for use in future legal cases. He wouldn't disclose further details, saying it was "too early."

Israeli Tourism Minister Yitzhak Herzog said Monday that he isn't concerned about prosecution of Israeli leaders, but criticized some officials for excessively belligerent statements during the war that could expose them to legal action abroad.

"Sometimes we pay a price for our statements, made by some of our people, that had no connection whatsoever to reality," Herzog, speaking from Finland, told Army Radio.

"Today we have to understand that wars, political situations and military situations include many components, and that one of the components that have to be weighed is international law." he said.

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