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Israel says Spain says it will amend war crimes law

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JERUSALEM, Jan 30 (Reuters) - Israel said on Friday the Spanish government had said it would work to amend a law under which a Madrid court is to consider trying seven Israelis over the killing of Palestinians.

Spain's High Court announced this week it would launch a war crimes investigation into a Israeli ex-defence minister and six other top security officials for their role in a 2002 attack that killed a Hamas commander and 14 civilians in Gaza.

Spanish law allows the prosecution of foreigners for such crimes as genocide, crimes against humanity and torture committed anywhere in the world.

"I was just told by the Spanish foreign minister that Spain decided to change the legislation," Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni told journalists after a telephone conversation with her Spanish counterpart Miguel Angel Moratinos.

"In order to change the possibility of different organisations, political organisations, to abuse the legal system in Spain in order to put charges against Israelis and others that are fighting terror."

Spain's Foreign Ministry did not reply to repeated telephone requests for confirmation.

Spanish state television TVE quoted government sources as saying the possibility of a legal "adjustment or modification" may have been mentioned, but it would not be retroactive and would not affect the case before the courts.

The case, filed on behalf of the Gaza-based Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, has sent shockwaves through Israel, which is trying to fend off foreign censure over the civilian casualty toll from its 22-day offensive in Hamas-ruled Gaza.

Calls to investigate Israel over alleged war crimes in Gaza conflict prompted Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to promise military personnel state protection from foreign prosecution.

Any government-initiated changes to Spanish law would have to be approved by congress. TVE said Spain would not renounce universal jurisdiction, which has been on its statute books since 1870.

Livni, who gave no details on how Spain planned to amend the law or handle the case against Israel, said of her conversation with Moratinos:

"I think that this is very important news and I hope that other states in Europe will do the same, and will follow this." (Writing by Dan Williams; additional reporting by Jason Webb and Martin Roberts in Madrid; editing by Andrew Roche)



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