**Belgium Opens Way for Sharon Trial**

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Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt says he supports a change to the country's law on human rights, to allow the prosecution of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for alleged war crimes.

Mr Verhofstadt said on Tuesday he did not object to parliament broadening the scope of the law so that a war crime could be prosecuted "no matter where the person accused of the crime is located," Belgian media said.

The country's 1993 "universal competence" law allows Belgian courts to try cases of alleged human rights abuses committed anywhere in the world.

But last June, a Belgian appeals court ruled that Mr Sharon could not be tried because crimes committed abroad could only prosecuted if the suspect was on Belgian territory.

The case had been brought by survivors of the killing by Lebanese Christian militiamen of hundreds of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps near Beirut in 1982.

A 1983 Israeli investigation found that Mr Sharon - as defence minister of the Israeli forces - was indirectly but personally responsible for the massacres.

**High-profile defendants**

In the run-up to the 2001 Israeli elections, Mr Sharon expressed regret about the "terrible tragedy" at Sabra and Shatila - but rejected any responsibility.

Besides Mr Sharon, war crimes proceedings have been brought in Belgium against a number of world figures.

These include Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Cuban President Fidel Castro, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo.

But those trials were suspended in June, after the Brussels appeals court ruling.

Correspondents say the country's Senate could take a vote to reverse this decision as early as next week.

So far, the only people tried under Belgium's controversial war crimes law are four Rwandans sentenced in 2001 for their role in the 1994 genocide of the country's Tutsi ethnic minority.