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# Belgian PM: Jewish caricatures at carnival ‘damage’ the country

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**AALST, BELGIUM (JTA)**

Belgium's prime minister said that some caricatures of Jews at the annual Aalst parade "damage" the country's values and reputation.

In a statement, Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes, who is Jewish, did not say which caricatures she took issue with at the Aalst Carnival, which is held each year in this city 10 miles west of Brussels. But her statement was the harshest rebuke yet by Belgium's highest elected official of the Aalst Carnival, which has for years drawn controversy for its ridicule of ethnic minorities, including Jews.

This year's procession included costumes of Chareidim with ant abdomens and legs. The 12 men wearing those suits set up a display called "complain ant," a phrase that in Dutch resembles the word for the Kosel. They wore stickers reading "obey" on their lapels.

Another group wore Chareidi-style suits and plastic hooked noses and waved a sign of "regulations"

that included one reading: "Do not tell the truth about Jews". Several dozen spectators also wore Chareidi suits with fake peyos.

About 80,000 people came to see the event, which had thousands of participants.

Last year, UNESCO withdrew its recognition of the Aalst Carnival as a world heritage event following the depiction of Jews at that year's event. One float featured two effigies of Chareidim holding bags of money and grinning. One of the effigies had a rat perched on its shoulder.

Aalst Mayor Christoph D'Haese defended the display as a mere expression of "the irreverent spirit" of Aalst.

In her statement, Wilmes wrote: "The federal government is sensitive to the reactions to some floats and costumes at the carnival." Whereas the event is "much more than only that", she wrote, "these actions damage our values and the reputation of our country".

At a press conference, D'Haese called Wilmes' statement "bizarre" and invited her to view next year's

parade so "she can form her opinion based on facts". He has defended the right of participants to mock Jews and other minorities as a form of satire. He called the event on Sunday a "display of unity".

Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), issued a statement condemning the parade.

"The satirical procession with antisemitic tropes in Aalst, Belgium, are extremely offensive and abuse the power of free speech which is such an essential ingredient in any liberal democracy.

"What is worse is that this type of antisemitism is a reminder of some of the darker moments of Europe's past: we have not seen Jews labelled with a yellow Star of David since the 1930s. We cannot pretend that these images are some kind of joke or do not cause fear. It is simply not acceptable for world leaders such as the King of Belgium to declare 'never again' one week and then sit idly



by when these symbols appear on their streets just weeks later.

"After last year's international protests against antisemitic motives in the Aalst street carnival, which was removed by UNESCO

from the list of Intangible World Heritage Sites, the organisers should have realised that precisely such antisemitic motives contribute to the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe."

