

BY ALEKSPHILLIPS

▶ THE AMERICAN Jewish Committee has called on the European Union to investigate a Belgian carnival notorious for featuring antisemitic effigies after it went ahead on Sunday despite pleas for it to be cancelled.

The "Carnaval" in Aalst, a Flemish city north west of Brussels, featured floats depicting caricatures of Chasidic Jews with big noses and a party of parade-goers dressed as Jewish ants. Some attendees wore Gestapo outfits.

Another float depicted Orthodox Jews miming the three wise monkeys maxim — "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" — next to piles of gold bars.

The Jewish advocacy group AJC condemned the parade, saying the depiction of Jewish ants "invoked the Nazi-era dehumanization of Jews as vermin".

Daniel Schwammenthal, director of the AJC's Brussels-based Transatlantic Institute, called the parade a "grotesque public display of antisemitic hate".

He said: "The European Commission ought to consider an Article 7 procedure as the Belgian authorities did nothing to prevent the outright antisemitic costumes, which clearly violate the EU's founding values, built on the lessons of the Holocaust and World War II.

"As the host of the EU institutions, Belgium has a particular responsibility to respect human dignity and human rights, including the rights of minorities."

Belgian Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès, who is Jewish, criticised the parade, saying that some of the caricatures "damage" the country's reputation.

She said Belgium was a democracy "based on fundamental freedoms which include freedom of expression" but that



Jewish caricatures on display last weekend were seen by Aalst mayor Christophe D'Haese (above right)

schmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, said that the tropes featured in the parade "are extremely offensive and abuse the power of free speech which is such an essential ingredient in any liberal democracy."

Before the carnival took place, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz called on authorities to ban it — but Mr D'Haese turned him down, saying it was "not for a Foreign Minister to decide what should or should not be allowed in Aalst."

The mayor was forced in December to renounce the carnival's Unesco cultural heritage status. Officials in Aalst have previously said they were sick of complaints to the UN that the event was antisemitic.

The carnival, which has its origins in the Middle Ages, has featured floats with Jewish caricatures for several years.

A float last year featured Charedi Jews with big noses sitting on piles of money. One of the caricatured figures had a white rat resting on its shoulder.

In 2013, it was reported that people attending the carnival had dressed in Nazi uniforms holding fake Zyklon B canisters while walking with other participants dressed as concentration camp prisoners.

To promote this year's parade, organisers released 150 banners featuring more caricatures with different Jewish stereotypes.

Mayor defends carnival

"this freedom evolves within a precise legal framework which aims to protect individuals from racism, antisemitism and other discrimination."

But Aalst mayor Christophe D'Haese calling her statement "bizarre", and invited her to next year's parade "she

can form her opinion based on facts."

Ronny Naftaniel, chairman of the Jewish Humanitarian Fund Advisory Board and vice-chairman Dutch Central Jewish Board, called the parade "nauseating", tweeting that "my stomach turns. And all of this is only possible in Belgium in

the year 2020 under the watchful eye of authorities."

During Sunday's parade, Mr D'Haese posed with a carnival-goer wearing a stereotypical hooked nose and side locks. He said: "I did not see an antisemitic or racist parade. To the contrary, I saw a high mass of free speech and creativity."

Attendees also denied the parade was aimed only at Jews. 21 year-old student Jielke told Reuters that "nobody is targeted", adding: "last year there was a lot of fuss, but we want to make fun of everyone."

A nurse from Aalst hospital, who wished not to be named, told *Le Parisien*: "they never intended to make fun of the Jews and to hurt, the media attention is completely exaggerated."

However, Chief Rabbi Pinchas Gold-



Extremely offensive and abuse the power of free speech'

