



Israeli court tells state to explain Lebanon inquiry

Thursday October 5, 08:21 PMJ

JERUSALEM (AFP) - Israel's High Court ordered the state to explain its decision to appoint a government inquiry into the handling of the Lebanon war instead of a more rigorous independent state commission probe.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government voted on September 17 to establish the five-member commission to investigate the 34-day offensive against the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah that failed to achieve its main objectives.

The decision was taken against the backdrop of heavy protest against what was seen as an attempt by Olmert's cabinet to avoid taking responsibility for the shortcomings.

On Thursday, the High Court issued an injunction ordering the state to explain within five days why it did not appoint an independent inquiry following an appeal by the Movement for Quality Government in Israel.

The commission -- led by retired judge Eliyahu Winograd -- suffered a second blow on Thursday when Attorney General Menavhem Mazuz ruled that the inquiry's secretary should resign because he had taken part in Olmert's Kadima party March election campaign.

"These circumstances could create an apparent conflict of interests and damage the public's trust in the committee," Mazuz said in a letter obtained by AFP.

Set up more than a month after a UN-brokered ceasefire ended the offensive on August 14, the inquiry will probe how the government and defence establishments dealt with the threat from Hezbollah before and during the war.

Olmert and his government have come under intense criticism over the war, which saw more than 160 Israelis killed but which fell short of its goals of stopping Hezbollah from firing nearly 4,000 rockets into Israel and securing the release of two soldiers seized by the Shiite militia.

Israel has also weathered heavy criticism abroad for the devastating use of its firepower in Lebanon, where more than 1,200 people -- mostly civilians -- were killed, and thousands of homes and infrastructure targets were bombed.