

REYKJAVIK (AFP) - Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt on Friday played down a diplomatic row with Israel sparked by a Swedish newspaper's claims that Israeli soldiers stole organs from dead Palestinians.

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When asked by reporters if the report published by the Aftonbladet tabloid would sour relations between the two countries, Bildt said: "I don't think so."

"We have very strong state relationship between Israel and our government. We are both open and democratic societies," he told reporters during a meeting of Nordic and Baltic foreign ministers in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik.

But Bildt declined to condemn the piece, saying the government has to respect the Swedish constitution's principles on freedom of expression.

"As a member of the Swedish government, acting on the Swedish constitution I have to respect the freedom of the speech, irrespective of the personal views that I might have," he said.

On Thursday, Stockholm distanced itself from a statement by Sweden's Ambassador to Israel Elisabet Borsiin Bonnier expressing outrage at the article, drawing a stinging response from the Israeli foreign ministry.

"It is regrettable that the Swedish foreign ministry does not intervene when it comes to a blood libel against Jews, which reminds one of Sweden's conduct during World War II when it also did not intervene," it said in a statement.

Sweden's Aftonbladet newspaper sparked the row on Monday when it published a report

Swedish FM downplays Israel row

Written by Johan Nylander

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claiming Israeli soldiers snatched Palestinian youths to steal their organs and returned their dismembered bodies a few days later.

Tensions between the two countries have been strained in recent years.

Sweden has regularly accused Israel of human rights violations while Israel accuses Sweden of being pro-Palestinian.

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