

DIMONA (AFP) - A Swedish journalist who caused outrage in Israel with allegations that soldiers stole organs of dead Palestinians defended his article on Monday to an often hostile audience in southern Israel.

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Speaking at a media conference in this southern Israeli town and often interrupted by hecklers, Donald Boström admitted he had no proof beyond the allegations of the families of Palestinians killed by the Israeli army.

But he said he found the claims serious enough to publish his August article, which sparked charges of "blood libel" inside the Jewish state and a diplomatic spat between Israel and Stockholm.

"One conclusion is that there has to be further investigation into the allegations of Palestinian families," he told the rowdy conference.

Boström's article, published in Sweden's popular Aftonbladet tabloid, alleged Israel secretly harvested the organs of killed Palestinians, with relatives saying the returned bodies of their loved ones had suspicious scars.

Israel vehemently denied the charges, with commentators saying the scars were a result of autopsies that Israeli law mandates be performed on all people killed in acts of violence.

Israel has demanded the Swedish government condemn the article that it has labelled an anti-Semitic "blood libel." Stockholm has refused, saying that to do so would violate the country's tradition of freedom of speech.

Swedish reporter defends Israel 'blood libel'

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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Boström commended the organisers for inviting him and giving him a chance to defend his work in Israel. "I admire your democratic courage in inviting me," he said.

His participation sparked controversy, with Israel's Vice Prime Minister Silvan Shalom boycotting the conference and withdrawing state funding to protest Bostrom's presence.

Boström, accompanied by security guards, was frequently interrupted by hecklers, including one who shouted he was "like Hitler."

About a dozen activists from the youth wing of the ruling Likud party attended the presentation wearing T-shirts reading: "Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East."

His interviewer, Israeli television presenter Yair Lapid, also took a hostile line.

Lapid questioned his journalistic ethics and accused Bostrom of being an anti-Semite "because you are willing to believe the Israeli government would take part in such atrocities."

Bostrom said: "In Sweden, like myself... we strongly support Israel's right to exist in peace. If you violate the rules ... we have a tradition to criticise."

In a statement, the Wiesenthal Centre slammed the Dimona city authorities for inviting Bostrom to the "travesty" of a conference.

"The sponsors of this travesty are confusing freedom of expression with blood libel. Bostrom should have no platform in Israel," said Shimon Samuels, the centre's director for international relations.

"Bostrom has betrayed the journalist's code of integrity in disseminating fabrications as facts

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without substantiation, insisting on their veracity and repeating them," he said.

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