Sharon Salutes France in Attempt at Reconciliation

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TEL AVIV, July 28 -- Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon praised France on Wednesday for its "determined action" against anti-Semitism, an apparent attempt to smooth over a diplomatic spat that began July 18 when he said France was the home of "the wildest anti-Semitism."

Speaking at a gala reception welcoming 200 French Jewish immigrants who arrived on a special charter from Paris, Sharon expressed concern about a new wave of anti-Semitism that he said threatened Jews and the Western world's way of life.

"We therefore very much appreciate the determined action of the French government, as well as the French president's stance against anti-Semitism," Sharon said. "We hope that this determination will serve as an example to other countries as well."

His comments appeared aimed at improving relations with Paris, which soured after France took umbrage at Sharon's call for French Jews to immigrate to Israel because of what he called rampant anti-Semitism.

A senior official close to Sharon said Wednesday that Israel had received a message from the office of the French president, Jacques Chirac, pronouncing as closed the matter of Sharon's remarks.

On Wednesday, Sharon told the French Jewish immigrants that one must make a distinction between the fight against anti-Semitism and the encouragement of immigration to Israel. "Jews must come to Israel not because of hatred or fear," he said, but because "it is their homeland."

France has a Jewish population of about 600,000, the largest in Western Europe.

Many people blame recent attacks on Jews and their property in France in part on members of the country's growing Muslim population of more than 5 million. Sharon appeared to be blaming European Muslims in his July 18 speech.

In the latest incident Tuesday night, 34 tombstones were desecrated in a Jewish cemetery near the northeastern French city of Strasbourg. Swastikas were scrawled on some gravestones.