

WORLD

French court OKs blocking of abortion clinic

By Francois Raitberger
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PARIS — Pro-choice supporters reacted angrily yesterday to a court ruling that found it was legal to block an abortion clinic on the grounds the activists were acting to safeguard the lives of unborn babies.

The unprecedented verdict Tuesday contradicted a 20-year-old law legalizing abortion. Going against a trend toward heavier punishment of anti-abortion activists, it appeared set to buoy their growing movement.

Faced with an outcry over the acquittal, Justice Minister Jacques Toubon ordered a state prosecutor to appeal.

In the verdict Tuesday, Judge Thierry Denervois de Bonnefond de Laviaille said a fetus was "a future human being, already alive." Anti-abortionists were therefore covered by a law authorizing action to safeguard life in the face of danger.

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Adding to the confusion, two other courts yesterday gave 40 anti-abortion protesters suspended prison terms.

The nine acquitted activists, including a doctor, were accused of blocking access to an abortion ward at Paris' Salpetriere public hospital in November. They had gathered outside the ward and sung hymns.

Martin Malvy, head of the Socialist group in the National Assembly, said the verdict was in violation of the abortion law and posed a problem of "extreme seriousness."

He said the judge had intruded into parliament's preserve by ruling that a fetus was a living human

being — an issue legislators have repeatedly refrained from tackling.

Socialist former minister Marie-Noelle Lienemann called the acquittal a step backward.

Mr. Toubon expressed concern that the acquittal could trigger a fresh spate of anti-abortion protests.

"In view of the case's strong impact on society . . . it seems necessary to avoid illegal behavior spreading," he told reporters.

"I have asked the state prosecutor to appeal so that an appeals court, and possibly the supreme court, may establish the law," he said.

The extreme-right National

Front said the appeal was part of leftist harassment of anti-abortionists and showed the conservative Mr. Toubon was at the beck and call of the left-wing magistrates' union.

"Mr Toubon's decision is the sad symbol that the political establishment right and left sticks together and that no change can be expected from [President Jacques] Chirac's friends," it said.

Anti-abortion protests have been multiplying in France, fueled by similar movements abroad and a rise in the far-right vote.

French activists, unlike some in the United States, have mainly kept their protests nonviolent, invading abortion wards, chaining themselves to hospital gates or gathering to pray outside clinics.

They have been fined and given suspended prison sentences as courts gave a lenient interpretation to the law providing for sentences of up to two years in prison for anyone trying to obstruct an abortion.