**Aids trial major test for France**

By PATRICK McDOWELL

PARIS, Sunday

'Like shopkeepers without scruples.

they sold blood. considering

haemophiliacs like customers and

not like patients," chief prosecutor

Michele Bernard-Requin said

in closing arguments on Friday in

a case in which French lawyers

have sued former government officials

over Aids tainted blood.

The case stems from criminal

charges filed four years ago by

1,000 hemophiliacs who received

Aids-tainted blood between

March and October 1985.At least

256 have since died.

The plaintiffs think the defendants

are guilty of mass murder,

and some declared themselves

"sickened" by government inaction on the issue.

France has been horrified by

the tale of callous bureaucrats

allegedly putting the bottom line

above lives.

"How can these people sleep at

night." says Pascal, 34 one of the

haemophiliacs.

Former Premier Laurent Fabius,

who led the socialist

government from 1984 to 1988

tried last Friday to express

.sympathies from the witness

stand. He met hisses and jeers

. "Assassins" cried protesters

outside the Palais de Justice "you

have blood on your hands'.

Mr Fabius left court under an

armed guard of the size usually

reserved for terrorist trials. In the

eyes of many Frenchmen, it is his

government on trial.

The court revelations have also

underscored France's schizophrenic

record on Acquired Immune

Defiency Syndrome.

Though Pasteur Institute scientists

were among the first to

isolate the HIV virus that causes

the disease, France has the worst

Aids rate in Europe.

Numerous poster campaigns

advising people to use condoms

have failed to break old habits.

Some 22,000 people suffer from

the disease, and an estimated

200,000 carry the HIV virus.

The questions hammered

home by media and lawyers since

the trial opened six weeks ago

are: When did officials know the

blood was contaminated? and

why didn't they do anything?

Ex-Deputy Health Minister

Edmond Herve shocked the court

last week when he admitted

knowing by June 20, 1985, that

nearly all of France's blood stocks

were contaminated.

Yet he did not order them

withdrawn for four more months,

almost a year after the United

States developed expensive

equipment to decontaminate

blood with heat.

The plaintiffs believes that officialdom

didn't purchase the

equipment in order to give the

Pasteur Institute, a rival of US

laboratories in Aids research,

time to develop its own system.

Why wasn't the blood simply

withdrawn? they had no clear answer,

but' insisted the reason was

not financial. The stocks were

worth an estimate $40 million.

The defendants say they are scapegoats who carried out policy at least implicitly approved at cabinet level.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs have launched the difficult process of brining charges against Fabius, and Georgina Dufoix ex Minister for Social Affairs,

It is doubtful the case will get far. Only the high Court of Justice, France’s top criminal court, can bring charges against Ministers related to their duties. However, any trial would have to be conducted through impeachment proceedings in Parliament.

Attorneys are seeking 2 million francs $400,00 in punitive damages for each haemophiliacs or for his or her survivors. They will also receive the same amount from an independent commission (AP)\_