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Italian deputies learn about Jewish refugees
 By PAUL LUNGEN, Staff Reporter
 Thursday, 25 June 2009



Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi was in Italy last week, ostensibly to mend fences and pave the way to improved diplomatic and economic relations.

Irwin Cotler

While the Italian government has pledged \$5 billion (US) to Libya as restitution for the colonial period, Jewish advocates were wondering why the North African country has not done the same for the Jews it mistreated.

Last week, a foreign affairs committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies (parliament) heard testimony outlining how Arab countries – including Libya – disenfranchised and expelled their Jewish citizens following the creation of the State of Israel.

Speaking on behalf of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), Irwin Cotler described the events that followed the 1947 rejection by Palestinian and Arab leaders of a UN plan to establish a Jewish and a Palestinian state. The result was the creation of a Palestinian refugee population, along with “a second, almost unknown, group of refugees, namely Jewish refugees from Arab countries.”

Cotler, a Liberal MP and former justice minister, said narratives of the Middle East conflict usually omit reference to Jewish refugees, focusing almost exclusively on the plight of Palestinians. Yet, around the time the Palestinian and wider Arab leadership was proclaiming a “war of extermination” against the Jewish state, Arab countries were acting against their indigenous Jewish populations – “disenfranchising them, dispossessing them of their property, arbitrarily arresting and detaining them, imprisoning and torturing them, and also murdering them,” he told the parliamentarians.

Following his presentation to the deputies, Cotler addressed the Italy-Israel Parliamentary Group on Iran and the Rome Jewish community on the issue of justice for Jews from Arab lands.

The hearings in Rome were organized with the support of Fiama Nirenstein, vice-chair of the foreign affairs committee in the Italian parliament. Nirenstein has taken an interest in the issue and has agreed to champion it in the Chamber of Deputies, said Stanley Urman, executive director of JJAC.

Parliamentarians in other European democracies have likewise lent their support to JJAC’s efforts to publicize the history of Middle Eastern and North African Jews. Some 850,000 were made refugees – more than the number of Palestinian refugees – but their situation has been largely ignored. JJAC contends any peace settlement involving Palestinian refugees must take into account the interest of Jewish refugees.

Bringing the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab lands to the Italian Chamber of Deputies is part of a wider educational strategy. “We have targeted the Quartet as the main international entity trying to promote peace negotiations,” Urman said. The Quartet comprises the European Union, the United States, the United Nations and Russia.

“JJAC is a catalyst. We try to motivate and mobilize the most important people to speak on behalf of the issue,” Urman said.

Cotler, an honorary co-chair of JJAC, who has also made the case for Jewish refugees to British MPs and the U.S. Congress, is scheduled to address German parliamentarians in early July.

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The U.S. Congress has adopted a JJAC proposal, passing a law that advises U.S. diplomats to raise the issue of Jewish refugees in international forums when Palestinian refugees are cited, Urman said.

Italy is an important player on this issue, as the country hosted many Libyan and Egyptian Jews who fled their homelands.

According to JJAC's website (www.justiceforjews.com), from 1949 to 1951, 30,000 Jews fled Libya. A series of anti-Jewish laws were passed beginning in the 1950s, one of which allowed the state to seize Jewish-owned property if the owner had any contact with Zionism.

Urman said JJAC's purpose is to convince opinion makers "to accept the fact there were two victim peoples of the Middle East conflict. The Palestinians demand Israel accept responsibility for the suffering of [displaced] Palestinians. We demand the Arab world accept responsibility for the ill treatment of Jews and for losses we have suffered."

Cotler said that many people who are otherwise well informed have never heard of the "forgotten exodus" of Jewish refugees.

He suggested the remedy for the victims of this "forced exodus" included "active remembrance," acknowledgment by the perpetrators, the need for the UN to include Jewish refugees in any Mideast negotiations and to eventually provide financial restitution to Jewish victims.

"You can make the case that a proportion of that [Italian] indemnification should go to the Jews of Libya, who were double victims, of the Italian fascist regime and the Libyan government's participation in the assault on Libyan Jews," Cotler said.

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