

## Congress mulls Jewish refugee cause

MICHAL LANDO, Jerusalem Post correspondent , THE JERUSALEM POST

Jul. 25, 2007

Two resolutions currently before Congress aim at requiring that any international discussion mentioning Palestinian refugees refer to Jewish refugees as well.

It is the latest attempt to bring greater attention to the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

Groups advocating on behalf of Jewish refugees from Arab countries have stepped up efforts over the last year to bring the issue to the forefront of discussions relating to Middle East refugees.

Last fall, a conference on "rights and redress" for this population launched a campaign in Jerusalem to register all families who lost assets when Jews fled Arab countries following the creation of the State of Israel.

In May, the House Foreign Affairs Middle East and South Asian Subcommittee Chairman Gary Ackerman held a hearing on the subject, the first such Congressional hearing, according to his staff.

The two resolutions currently before Congress were introduced at a Congressional Human Rights Caucus briefing last week that addressed the mass displacement of minority populations from Arab countries. It is estimated that 850,000 Jews fled Arab states following the creation of the State of Israel.

The resolutions - one in the House and the other in the Senate - instruct the president to ensure that any international discussion of Middle East refugees make mention of Jewish, Christian and other refugees "as a matter of law and equity."

Since 1947, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted 681 resolutions on the Middle East conflict, including 101 resolutions on Palestinian refugees.

"During that same period there were no UN resolutions, nor any recognition or assistance from the international community, for Jewish and other refugees from Arab countries," said Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL), a member of the Caucus, at the briefing.

The principal parties involved in the Mideast peace process must restore "fidelity" to the narrative, said Irwin Cotler, human rights activist and former justice minister and attorney-general of Canada. Cotler blamed the UN for "distorting" this narrative.

"We need to rectify a historical injustice that has gone on for 60 years, and return the narrative of Jews from Arab countries to the Mideast narrative," Cotler told *The Jerusalem Post*. Cotler was unable to attend the briefing, but submitted written testimony that focused on the themes of "truth, justice and reconciliation."

Any Mideast peace process needed to address the "rights and redress" of Jews from Arab countries, said Cotler. More than that, he said, the US, in the course of its foreign policy, should ensure that any resolution regarding refugees must include reference to Jewish refugees.

"We are not saying we should exclude Palestinian refugees, but certainly should not be excluding consideration for Jewish refugees," said Cotler.

The hearing is the latest in a series of ongoing efforts to give the cause a higher profile.

"There haven't been too many times that Jewish refugees have been mentioned in Congress, and this [briefing] certainly shows that we are putting it on the radar screen," said Stanley Urman, executive director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, a coalition of Jewish communal organizations that worked with the Caucus to plan this briefing.

Of late, interest in the issue has permeated beyond the Jewish world. In late June, *The Guardian* published an article on this very issue, "The other right of return," by Egyptian journalist Khaled Diab. And Al Hura, an Arabic television station, covered the Congressional briefing last week.

"This shows that we are not only making the Jewish radar screen, but the Arab community is beginning to pick up interest," said Urman.

Groups like Justice for Jews from Arab Countries and Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA) asserted that the goal was not financial compensation, but rather recognition.

"We have targeted the US, made a representation to members of the European parliament, and to Russia's Foreign Ministry, and we hope to bring it to the UN in the fall," said Urman. "Our goal on the political level is to ensure that this is on the table for discussion - we have to move from truth, to justice, to reconciliation."

At the briefing, Regina Bubil-Waldman, cofounder and chair of JIMENA, told the story of how her family was nearly murdered while escaping from Libya in 1967. Waldman has brought her story and the larger issue of Jewish refugees to university campuses throughout the US to raise awareness. The story of Jews who were forced to flee Arab countries has largely been left out of hasbara efforts, said Waldman.

"Most of the people advocating campus hasbara, or to general audiences, bring good talking points, but neglect the fact that we have a good balancing narrative, namely that more Jews were made refugees than Palestinians," said Waldman. "The fact that we have been successfully absorbed by Israel doesn't take away from the fact that our home civilization has been destroyed, and that we are extinct from North Africa, where we were for 2,500 years."

A promotional banner for Vonage. On the left is the Vonage logo. In the center, it says "Unlimited Local & Long Distance Calling" and "1 MONTH FREE!". To the right, a large "\$24.99/mo." is displayed with a telephone handset icon. At the bottom right, there is a "Start Saving" button with a right-pointing arrow.

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