

U.S. resolution would declare Jewish, Palestinian refugees equal

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UNITED NATIONS - Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government will be asked to match a U.S. resolution to give the plight of Jewish and other non-Muslim refugees from Arab lands as much weight in the Middle East peace process as that of Palestinian refugees.

The U.S. House of Representatives is expected to pass a resolution Tuesday that will - together with an upcoming similar measure from the Senate - press the Bush administration to insist peace talks consider all refugee populations equally.

Research led by the group Justice for Jewish Refugees shows many of the 856,000 Jews who left their homes in Arab countries in the decades after the creation of Israel were forced out by oppressive Arab policies.

Yet any mention of refugees in Palestinian-Israeli peace talks has almost exclusively focused on the descendents of the 600,000-700,000 Palestinians the United Nations declared uprooted following the attack by Arab countries on the new state.

In a telephone news conference Monday with U.S. congressmen sponsoring the new initiative, Sylvain Abitbol, co-president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, said the group will do its "utmost . . . to get the support of the Canadian government" for the initiative at the UN.

"We seek this to achieve balance in the peace process - but it is also for history because we need our children to know that almost a million Jews lived in countries where they had been for over 2,000 years, even before the advent of Islam," he added in an interview.

B'nai Brith Canada has already held a briefing session on the issue on Parliament Hill, and will press Canada - as chair of the Refugee Working Group under the peace track launched in Madrid in 1991 - to include displaced Jews as refugees.

The leading sponsors of the bipartisan House initiative denied it is aimed at neutralizing the Arab claim of "right of return" for Palestinian refugees to areas now inside Israel.

"This is not intended to diminish nor to promote (rights of) any other . . . refugees," said Joseph Crowley. "I think most of the world doesn't know there were Jewish



CREDIT: AFP/Getty Images

Israeli children attend a rocket attack drill at a school Monday in the Israeli settlement of Har Homa.

refugees in Arab countries."

UN-recognized Palestinian refugees now number around 3.7 million. Entry into Israel of that many Muslims would effectively end the profile of the country as a Jewish state.

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