

## Jews forced out of Arab countries seek reparations

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Justice Minister Meir Sheetrit pledged Monday to reestablish his ministry's unit for managing compensation claims of Jews forced out of Arab countries and to reinvigorate the effort to make their case to the world.

Sheetrit addressed a conference on "rights and redress" for this population held in Jerusalem Monday, which launched a campaign to register all the families who lost assets when Jews fled Arab countries after the creation of the State of Israel.

Sheetrit, like many at the conference, stressed that the goal wasn't to get financial compensation.

"The campaign is not for money," the minister said. "The idea is to put on the table, on a parallel level, the claims of Jewish refugees with the claims of the Palestinians," the latter of whom he described as having successfully garnered world attention.

Sheetrit originally established the unit under his first term as justice minister more than three years ago, but admitted that it was neglected once he left office and its duties were transferred to someone already responsible for pursuing Holocaust compensation claims.

"It was a mistake" to have made such a switch, he said, and his promise to make it a separate unit once again garnered cheers from the 50 or so conference participants.

So far, only some 13,000 Israelis have been registered, though the conference organizers estimate that about 850,000 Jews were made refugees from Arab lands after the founding of Israel.

Now it is estimated that less than 10,000 remain in these areas. A conference co-organizer, The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries, has suggested that \$100 billion of assets were lost or confiscated, though specific calculations are difficult.

A draft declaration from Monday's conference declared that "no just, comprehensive Middle East peace can be reached without recognition of, and redress for, the uprooting of centuries-old Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa."

It urged the government of Israel to incorporate the issue into its negotiations with the Palestinians and Arab states and pressed Diaspora communities to help collect the stories of these Jewish refugees and advocate on their behalf.

Stanley Urman, executive director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, another co-sponsor of Monday's event, also said the "international rights and redress campaign" was intended to heighten awareness of the history and culture of these Jews.

"This is a campaign to document Jewish history," he said to applause, "to record the personal narratives of these families and their displacement, to make sure that the 2,500-year history of Mizrahi Jewry in Arab countries will not be lost to the pages of history."

Sheetrit, whose own family is originally from Morocco, urged speedy action: "If we wait another 10 or 20 years there will be nobody to make any claims."

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