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London Parley to Highlight Plight of Jews from Arab Lands

By Jonny Paul

(June 22, 2008) – LONDON - A conference highlighting the plight of the Jews who left, or fled, Arab countries will take place in London this week, along with the first ever hearing in Parliament on Jewish refugees from Arab lands.

The first congress of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries will run from Monday to Wednesday in central London, with the parliamentary briefing on Tuesday in the House of Lords.

“When the issue of refugees is raised within the context of the Middle East, people invariably refer to Palestinian refugees,” Justice for Jews said in a statement. “There is almost no awareness of the fact that 850,000 Jews living in Arab countries were forced out of their homes during the period surrounding Israel's creation.”

The congress aims to highlight the human rights violations and the individual and communal losses suffered by members of Jewish communities that had lived for centuries in the Middle East, North Africa and Gulf and who “were stripped of their jobs, businesses, homes, passports and ancient heritage by most Arab governments,” according to the organizers of the two-day conference.

The conference's aims include conducting public education programs on the heritage and rights of former Jewish refugees from Arab countries, registering family history narratives, and cataloging communal and individual losses.

“Jews are one of the indigenous peoples of the Middle East and there have been ancient Jewish communities in countries such as Iraq for over 2,500 years, more than a millennium before the rise of Islam,” organizers said.

“Today these historic Jewish communities have been effectively destroyed, with almost no recognition from the international community or the Arab countries themselves. From a Jewish population in the Arab Middle East of 886,000 in the year 1948 in places like Algeria, Morocco and Yemen, now there are less than 8,000 Jews living in Arab countries.”

Organized by Congress of *Justice for Jews from Arab Countries* in association with the *Board of Deputies of British Jews*, the joint parliament hearing will be convened by Labor Party MP John Mann and Labor peer Lord Anderson of Swansea.

This joint briefing will highlight that two refugee populations emerged as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict and will look at the most viable and appropriate role the UK should play in seeking to resolve issues affecting all Middle East refugees, the congress said.

Historian Martin Gilbert will speak on the “Historical Narrative and the UK's Response to Middle East Refugees,” and former Canadian justice minister Irwin Cotler will speak on “International Law and Middle East Refugees.”

Two former refugees will testify on their escapes from Iraq and Egypt, respectively, and subsequent resettlement in the UK.

Justice for Jews from Arab Countries is a coalition of 77 Jewish communities and organizations in 20 countries.