

Olmert Says Go Slow on Jewish-Refugee Rights

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Ben Harris / *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*

Organizers of a major conference on behalf of Jewish refugees from Arab countries were told by Israeli premier Ehud Olmert that any discussion of the issue was premature.

In a recent letter to leaders of *Justice for Jews from Arab Countries*, which organized the conference here on Monday, Olmert said that it was premature to raise the refugee question right now. But he gave assurances that when the issue is eventually put on the table, Israel would "reaffirm its commitment to resolving the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries as well."

Olmert's letter, dated Oct. 8, came as Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, an advocacy coalition of 72 groups, was preparing to unveil documentation showing how Arab states conspired to persecute their Jewish citizens. In the aftermath of Israel's creation, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled Arab lands where they had lived for centuries, a total roughly equivalent to the number of Palestinian refugees that fled or were driven from Israel.

Estimates of the number of Jewish refugees range generally from 700,000 to 1 million, a majority of whom were absorbed by Israel.

Correcting the Record

Leaders of the coalition insist that their efforts to publicize the rights of Jewish refugees - as well as the culpability of Arab governments in exacerbating their plight -- have nothing to do with winning reparations. Instead, they say, they are seeking justice and establishing an accurate historical record.

"This is not about money. This is not anti-Palestinian refugees," said Stanley Urman, executive director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries.

"We have one simple objective, and that is, in the context of peace, the issues for both sides must be addressed," he continued. "Our objective is to ensure that any explicit reference to Palestinian refugees is matched by an explicit reference to Jewish refugees, as a matter of law and equity."

Previously, Israeli leaders appeared committed to that objective. In March 2002, and again in December 2003, the Israeli Cabinet decided to pursue the restoration of property owned by Jews who fled Arab countries, and authorized cooperation with other ministries and organizations toward that end.

But in more recent statements, Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have acknowledged the suffering of Palestinian refugees without mentioning the plight of Jewish refugees.

According to Urman, delegates planned to issue a declaration on the conclusion of the conference outlining the organization's plan of action.

'Persecute Their Populations'

On Monday, the coalition released documents discovered in U.N. archives showing that, following the General Assembly's partition resolution in November 1947, the Arab League drafted a law allowing for various measures to be taken against their Jewish citizens. Among the measures were the freezing of Jewish bank accounts, imprisonment, exile and forced conscription into the military.

In a 1948 memorandum to the U.N. Economic and Social Council, the World Jewish Congress drew attention to the draft law, and warned that the situation of Jews in Arab countries had become "critical." Consideration of the matter was subsequently killed by a pro-Arab parliamentary maneuver.

"We seem to have found a body of evidence relating to both events and materials that suggest that the displacement of 1 million Jews in 10 Arab countries did not happen by happenstance," explained Urman. "The documents we have uncovered reveal that there was an orchestrated effort by the Arab League to have all its member states react in a coordinated fashion to persecute their Jewish populations and use them as political weapons in their struggle against the State of Israel."

Although this history has long been known, Urman stated that the new documents are the "smoking gun" that conclusively demonstrate collusion among Arab leaders to drive out their Jewish citizens.