

Foreign Ministry summons Polish ambassador over restitution bill

THE JERUSALEM POST

By Lahav Harkov, Jeremy Sharon
June 27, 2021

“I have a feeling that no one in Israel read the bill and does not know its content,” Poland’s Ambassador to Israel said Sunday.

The Foreign Ministry summoned Poland’s Ambassador to Israel, Mark Magierowski, on Sunday, over a bill that passed the lower house of the parliament in Warsaw making restitution of Holocaust survivors’ property much more difficult.

Alon Bar, head of the Foreign Ministry Strategic-Political department, said that Israel is “deeply disappointed by the bill... that, according to experts, is expected to negatively influence 90% of Holocaust survivors’ and their descendants’ requests to return property.”

Bar reiterated Foreign Minister Yair Lapid’s message that the bill will have a negative impact on relations between Israel and Poland, and said it is not too late for Poland to stop the legislative process and return to its commitments to hold a dialogue about restitution.

“This is not a historic dialogue about responsibility for the Holocaust; rather, it is a moral duty of Poland towards its former citizens, whose property was confiscated during the Holocaust and under communist rule,” Bar explained.

The Polish Foreign Ministry responded later on Sunday by announcing that they had summoned head of the Israeli consulate in Poland, Tal Ben Ari, over what they described as “intervening in the internal affairs of a foreign state.”

Magierowski said in an interview with KAN Bet on Sunday: “I have a feeling that no one in Israel read the bill and does not know its content.

“The goal of Israeli politicians is to take the opportunity to destroy relations between us and not to defend Holocaust survivors,” he added.

The bill in question sets a 30-year time limit to appeal administrative decisions on returning confiscated property. It passed the Sejm, the lower house of Poland’s parliament, on Thursday.

Soon after, Lapid said that “no law will change history. The Polish law is immoral and will severely harm relations between the countries. Israel will stand as a bastion protecting the memory of the Holocaust and the dignity of Holocaust survivors and their property.”

“Poland, on whose ground millions of Jews were murdered, knows the right thing to do,” the foreign minister added.

The United States also spoke out against the bill.

“The decision of Poland’s parliament yesterday was a step in the wrong direction. We urge Poland not to move this legislation forward,” US State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a tweet on Friday.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki pledged that his country would not pay restitution to Holocaust survivors for German crimes committed against them on its territory during World War II.

“I can only say that as long as I am the prime minister, Poland will surely not pay for the German crimes. Not a zloty [Polish currency], not a euro, not a dollar,” Morawiecki said on Friday.

Lapid responded to Morawiecki's comment on Sunday, saying that "millions of Jews were murdered on the ground of Poland and no law will erase their memory. We are not interested in Polish money and hinting that is antisemitic. We are fighting for the memory of those murdered in Holocaust, for our pride in our people, and we won't let any parliament pass laws meant to deny the Holocaust."

Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Pawel Jablonski presented the bill as an anti-corruption measure and said that Lapid’s comments reflect “a deep ignorance of the facts.”

“Poles, like Jews, were victims of terrible German crimes,” Jablonski tweeted. “The act passed in the Sejm protects the victims of these crimes and their heirs against fraud and abuse. It is the implementation of the judgment of the Constitutional Tribunal of 2015. As a result of wild re-privatization... many people were deprived of their possessions.”

Poland-Israel ties have been strained since 2018, after Poland passed a law penalizing those arguing that Poland or the Polish people were in any way responsible for the Holocaust.

Prominent Israelis sharply criticized the law; then-foreign minister Israel Katz repeated a quote from former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir that Poles imbibe antisemitism with their mothers’ milk, and Lapid, who at the time was an opposition lawmaker, said Poland was complicit in the Holocaust. Then-prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said soon after that some Poles collaborated with the Nazis, which also sparked uproar in Poland.

Poland was home to one of the world’s biggest Jewish communities until it was almost entirely wiped out by the Nazis during World War II.

Jewish former property owners and their descendants have been campaigning for compensation since the fall of communism in 1989.

Poland is the only EU country that has not legislated on property restitution, despite repeated calls to do so from the US.

On Saturday, some 70 headstones were knocked over and smashed in a Jewish cemetery in the city of Bielsko-Biala in southern Poland, against the background of the tensions regarding the bill.

Chief Rabbi of Poland Rabbi Michael Schudrich described the incident as the worst case of cemetery desecration in the country in the last 30 years.

He said that the police were working intensely to try and find the culprits.

Schudrich said that the Jewish community was planning a ceremony at the cemetery on Tuesday which would be attended by Jewish leaders and, he hoped, national leaders as well.

The rabbi said that caustic rhetoric from Polish politicians in recent days regarding the legislation controversy was the proximate cause of antisemitic incidents such as the attack against the Jewish cemetery in Bielsko-Biala.

“When you have this tension, politicians say things they shouldn’t say, and when politicians start using hurtful, hateful language then it is no surprise that this kind of thing happens,” said Schudrich.

“I hope we can avoid a downward spiral of rhetorical attacks” he added.

Dr. Rafal Pankowski, an associate professor at Collegium Civitas and a co-founder of the Never Again Association, notes that there has been an uptick in rhetoric against Israel with antisemitic overtones by Polish politicians in recent days.

Tobias Siegal contributed to this report.

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/foreign-ministry-summons-polish-ambassador-over-restitution-bill-672185>