

Israel slams Polish PM for WWII ‘Jewish perpetrators’ remark

By ARON HELLER

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JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli politicians accused Poland’s prime minister of anti-Semitism Saturday for equating the Polish perpetrators in the Holocaust to its supposed “Jewish perpetrators,” setting off a new chapter in an angry dispute over Poland’s new bill criminalizing the mention of Polish complicity in the Nazi-led genocide.

Yair Lapid, head of the centrist opposition Yesh Atid party, said Israel should recall its ambassador immediately in response to Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s comments, which he called “anti-Semitism of the oldest kind.”

“The perpetrators are not the victims. The Jewish state will not allow the murdered to be blamed for their own murder,” said Lapid, the son of a Holocaust survivor.

Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay said Morawiecki sounded like any other Holocaust denier with the remark he gave in Munich, Germany on Saturday.

“The blood of millions of Jews cries from the earth of Poland over the distortion of history and the escape from blame. Jews were murdered in the Holocaust and Poles took an active part in their murder,” Gabbay said. “The government of Israel has to be a voice for the millions of murdered and strongly denounce the Polish prime minister’s words.”

Morawiecki was responding to a question from an Israeli journalist at the Munich Security Conference. Asking about a new Polish law that criminalizes some statements about the Holocaust, the journalist shared a personal story about his parents being reported to the Nazis by Polish neighbors. He asked if he would now be considered a criminal in Poland for relating the story.

“Of course it’s not going to be punishable, not going to be seen as criminal, to say that there were Polish perpetrators, as there were Jewish perpetrators, as there were Russian perpetrators, as there were Ukrainian, not only German perpetrators,” Morawiecki said in response.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also attended the Munich conference, called his Polish counterpart’s comment “outrageous.”

“There is a problem here of lack of understanding of history and lack of sensitivity to the tragedy of our people,” Netanyahu said, adding that he planned to speak with Morawiecki soon.

It was just the latest fallout from the Polish Holocaust speech law that has drawn outrage in Israel and elsewhere.

In recent weeks, Israeli officials have sharply criticized the legislation that criminalizes blaming Poland as a nation for crimes committed by Nazi Germany. Israeli critics have accused Poland of seeking to use the law to whitewash the role of some Poles who helped Germans kill Jews during the war. Holocaust scholars estimate that Poles might have either killed or helped Germans kill as many as 180,000 to 200,000 Jews.

Polish authorities say they just want to protect Poland from being depicted as a collaborator of the Nazis when the country was Adolf Hitler's first victim and suffered through nearly six years of war and occupation.

Morawiecki also paid his respects Saturday at the Munich grave of fighters from a Polish underground military unit, known as the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade, that collaborated during the war with Poland's Nazi German occupiers.

The prime minister's office tweeted a photo of him with his hands clasped before the grave and said he lit a candle and laid a wreath there.

The unit, which was rooted in a far-right prewar political movement, had also fought Germans. For tactical reasons, it collaborated with the Germans late in the war to focus on fighting communists, who were laying the groundwork for what would be decades of Soviet-backed rule.

An anti-racism group in Poland, Never Again, said it was "appalled" by Morawiecki's visit to the grave. Jan Grabiec, spokesman for Poland's main opposition party, Civic Platform, criticized both Morawiecki's words in Munich and graveside visit, saying they contributed to Poland's worsening international image.

Some commenters praised the prime minister on Twitter for honoring what they called national heroes.

Israeli Labor Party lawmaker Itzik Shmuly, who is pushing for a counter bill in the Israeli parliament to criminalize the denial of Nazi collaboration, quipped on Twitter that "the next step of Morawiecki's pathetic project to erase the crimes of the Polish people is probably going to be blaming the Jews for their own Holocaust and presenting the Nazis as victims of the circumstances."

Morawiecki's office had no immediate reaction to the uproar in Israel.

Vanessa Gera and Monika Scislowska in Warsaw contributed.

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