Israel and the African Refugee Crisis: A WORLD SOLUTION FOR A WORLD PROBLEM

by Rafael Medoff and Uriel Levy

(Dr. Medoff is founding director of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, in Washington, D.C.; Uriel Levy is director of the Combat Genocide Association, in Tel Aviv.)

The name "Evian" will forever be remembered as the site of an international conference, seventy-five years ago this week, that was supposed to save the Jews of Germany--but instead sealed their doom. Evian should also be remembered, however, for its link to the rescue of another group of refugees in the 1970s.

And perhaps it will also go down in the history books as a turning point in addressing the problem of the tens of thousands of African refugees who have entered Israel in recent years.

With the persecution of Jews in Germany and Austria intensifying in 1938 and refugee advocates urging U.S. intervention, the Roosevelt administration initiated an international conference, in the French resort town of Evian-les-Bains, to address the crisis. Thirty-two countries agreed to send delegations.

In his announcement, President Franklin Roosevelt emphasized that "no nation would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of emigrants than is permitted by its existing legislation." The U.S. also assured Great Britain that Mandatory Palestine would not be discussed as a possible refuge; the British feared admitting more Jews to the Holy Land would anger the Arab world.

The July 6 opening session at the luxurious Hotel Royal was not well attended. The hotel's chief concierge later recalled why: "All the delegates had a nice time. They took pleasure cruises on the lake. They gambled at night at the casino...It is difficult to sit indoors hearing speeches when all the pleasures that Evian offers are outside."

When they finally got around to addressing the issue, the delegates made clear that everyone expected somebody else to solve the problem. Typical was the Australian representative, who asserted that "as we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one." The only exception was the tiny Dominican Republic, which declared it would accept as many as 100,000 Jewish refugees. But that project never materialized, because the Roosevelt administration feared the arrival of so many refugees in the nearby Caribbean would enable them to sneak into the United States.

Golda Meir, who attended Evian as an observer, concluded that "nothing was accomplished at Evian except phraseology." She remarked afterwards: "There is only one thing I hope to see before I die, and that is that my people should not need expressions of sympathy anymore." Another critic pointed out that "Evian" was "Naive" spelled backwards. The problem, however, was not naiveté so much as it was calculated indifference.

In 1979, Evian was the site of another refugee conference--but with a very different outcome. That year, hundreds of thousands of refugees, the so-called "boat people," fled the Communist takeover of Southeast Asia. In his emotional keynote speech, U.S. Vice President Walter Mondale referred to the 1938 gathering, which "failed the test of civilization." He urged his audience to learn from the past: "We face a world problem. Let us fashion a world solution...History will not forgive us if we fail. History will not forget us if we succeed."

The speech is widely credited with inspiring many countries to open their doors to the boat people. "The nations stepped up to the crisis," Mondale's chief speechwriter, Martin Kaplan, later recalled. "It was one of those rare occasions when words may actually have saved lives."

The problem of today's African refugees differs in many ways from the plight of German Jews or Southeast Asian boat people. Those fleeing Hitler or the Khmer Rouge were unquestionably victims of persecution, while the Africans seeking admission to Israel include some refugees from the Darfur genocide as well as many who are fleeing from poverty or civil strife rather than ethnic persecution.

Israel, which was the first country to take in Vietnamese refugees, has a long history of assisting African countries as well. It has given temporary shelter to many of the recent African migrants. At the same time, Israelis have legitimate concerns that they are being unfairly pressured to shoulder all or most of the burden of caring for the new refugees. A Knesset committee is now considering legislation that would legalize the status of a limited number of genuine refugees from genocide, and provide vocational training for those who will be returning to their countries of origin.

On this 75th anniversary of the first Evian conference, the time has come for a new, balanced approach to the African refugee issue. An international solution is needed for this international problem. We call on the nations of the world to accept their responsibility to share the burden of resolving the African refugee crisis. We hope Israel will play an appropriate role in such an effort alongside other nations that are committed to doing their fair share. Men and women of good will must come together in a partnership of humanity to face this crisis.

300 Scholars, Clergy, Cultural Figures from Around the World Call for a New Approach to Israel's African Refugee Crisis

WASHINGTON, D.C. - On the 75th anniversary of the failed Evian refugee conference, 300 Holocaust scholars, clergymen, Jewish leaders, and cultural luminaries have signed a declaration calling on the international community to assist in resolving Israel's African refugee crisis.

The declaration was organized by The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, in cooperation with the Hebrew University-Hadassah Genocide Prevention Program, and the Tel Aviv-based Combat Genocide Association.

Israel has been at the center of international controversy over its handling of the tens of thousands of African refugees who have been arriving at its border.

The new "Evian Declaration," as it is called, is timed to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the failed Evian refugee conference of July 1938. That U.S.-organized conference, held in France in 1938, was supposed to find places of refuge for Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, but the countries attending the assembly refused to open their doors to the refugees.

The declaration is also linked to a second conference held at Evian, in 1979, at which U.S. vice president Walter Mondale appealed for international cooperation to shelter hundreds of thousands of "boat people" fleeing Southeast Asia. Mondale based his appeal on the importance of not repeating the failure of 1938. His efforts inspired numerous countries to join the U.S. in admitting the Southeast Asian refugees.

Echoing Mondale, the Evian Declaration states: "We urge the international community to address this crisis in the spirit of the appeal made by U.S. Vice President Walter F. Mondale [in 1979, and] accept their responsibility to share the burden of resolving the African refugee crisis." The declaration "acknowledges the Israeli public's legitimate concern over expectations that Israel should shoulder all or most of the burden of caring for the new refugees," while at the same time expressing hope "that Israel will play an appropriate role in such an effort alongside other nations that are committed to doing their fair share."

The 300 signatories on the Evian Declaration include religious leaders, Holocaust and genocide scholars, and political and cultural leaders from Canada, Chile, France, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States:

- --Leading Holocaust and genocide scholars, including Prof. David S. Wyman; Prof. Yehuda Bauer of Hebrew University and Yad Vashem; and Rabbi Dr. Yitz Greenberg, past chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.
- --Political figures such as Canadian parliament member (and former Justice Minister) Irwin Cotler and former U.S. Senator Rudy Boschwitz of Minnesota.
- --Noted Jewish community figures, including Seymour D. Reich, former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center; and Prof. Judea Pearl, the UCLA scientist and founder of the Daniel Pearl Foundation.
- --Christian leaders such as the Episcopal Bishop of Southeast Florida, Rev. Leopold Frade; Rev. John T. Pawlikowski of Catholic Theological Union; and Dr. Merelyn Bates-Mims, chair of the Cathedral Human Rights Institute.
- --A wide range of Jewish religious leaders, including the president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Rabbi Dr. Dan Ehrenkrantz; the executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Mark Dratch; the president of the Council of Young Israel Rabbis, Rabbi Chaim Wasserman; and Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple, in Los Angeles, named by Newsweek as the most influential rabbi in America.
- --Cultural luminaries such as award-winning author Cynthia Ozick; noted Israeli novelist Joseph Agassi; novelist and human rights scholar Prof. Thane Rosenbaum; and prominent Israeli theater director Moti Sandak.

Wyman Institute director Dr. Rafael Medoff said: "The broad cross-section of distinguished individuals signing the Evian Declaration demonstrates the breadth of support for this effort." He said the declaration will be sent to the governments of every member-state of the United Nations.

THE EVIAN DECLARATION

Significant numbers of African men, women, and children are fleeing genocide, political persecution, or economic hardship, and many have been seeking refuge in Israel. We note that the people of Israel have an impressive record of assisting African and other underdeveloped countries, and sheltering refugees from around the world. At the same time, we acknowledge the Israeli public's legitimate concern over expectations that Israel should shoulder all or most of the burden of caring for the new refugees.

We urge the international community to address this crisis in the spirit of the appeal made by U.S. Vice President Walter F. Mondale at the United Nations Conference on Indochinese Refugees, held in Evian, France, in 1979. He said the countries attending the infamous 1938 Evian conference "failed the test of civilization" by refusing to help Europe's Jewish refugees, and he urged the 1979 attendees to cooperate in resolving the crisis of "boat people" fleeing Indochina: "We face a world problem. Let us fashion a world solution." Those words moved governments to act. Hundreds of thousands of lives were saved.

We call on the nations of the world to accept their responsibility to share the burden of resolving the African refugee crisis. We hope Israel will play an appropriate role in such an effort alongside other nations that are committed to doing their fair share. With the approach of the 75th anniversary of the original Evian conference, in July 2013, we urge men and women of good will to come together in a partnership of humanity to face this crisis.

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Sal Amendola Artist & editor

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Nadav Argov, Esq. Legal Adviser, Combat Genocide Association

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Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide

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David Cohen Senior Advisor, Civic Ventures Senior Congressional Fellow, Council for a Livable World

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