

YAHOO NEWS

JEWISH GROUP RAPS EASTERN EU STATES ON HOLOCAUST PROPERTY CLAIMS

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PRAGUE (Reuters) - A global Jewish group urged central and east European countries on Wednesday to return or provide compensation for property seized during the Holocaust and accused Poland, Latvia and Romania in particular of foot-dragging.

After a conference in Prague, the World Jewish Restitution Organisation (WJRO) said tens of thousands of Nazi Holocaust victims and their heirs had not been able to resolve claims on stolen property despite two decades of trying since the fall of post-war communist regimes in central and eastern Europe.

The properties in question are now in the hands of private citizens, businesses and various levels of governments.

WJRO President Ron Lauder, a businessman, philanthropist and billionaire son of fashion magnate Estee Lauder, said Poland, Latvia and Romania were posing particular obstacles.

"The WJRO is appalled that the government in Warsaw now adamantly refuses to offer any legislative gestures to address languishing private property claims," he said in a statement.

"WJRO calls for Latvia to finally enact appropriate legislation for the return of Jewish communal property, concluding many years of discussion."

Lauder added that the WJRO was "disappointed" in Romania, which he said had passed restitution laws but left in place red tape that was stalling the process.

Officials of the three governments were not immediately available for comment.

The WJRO is an umbrella organisation of Jewish groups, including the American Jewish Community, B'nai B'rith International, the World Jewish Congress, the World Zionist Organisation and others seeking to recover Jewish property looted during the 1933-1945 era of Nazi Germany.

Some six million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis and their allies during the Holocaust, with many being sent to death camps after their possessions were seized.

MAJOR DISPUTE IN LATVIA

In Latvia there is a longstanding dispute between the government and Jewish groups who say Riga should return to their community property that belonged to Holocaust victims.

In June, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pressed Latvia to resolve the claims. At the time, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said the process had to move gradually.

On Tuesday, a group of Hungarian Jews called on Russia to return hundreds of sacred Torah scrolls and other items stolen by the Nazis and then later by the Soviet Red Army and taken back to Russia at the end of World War Two.

At the Prague restitution conference, delegates from 41 countries reviewed progress on a process that began in 2009 with the Terezin Declaration, named after the former Nazi concentration camp in the Czech town of the same name.

At that meeting, officials said the value of European Jewish assets seized during the Holocaust amounted to around \$15 billion (9.3 billion pounds), but would be far greater today.

The groups plan to meet again next year in Brussels.

Germany said on November 15 that it would make payments to Holocaust victims who have still not been compensated - roughly 80,000 people in eastern Europe - nearly 70 years after the Nazi regime crumbled.

Former West Germany acknowledged the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazis and began in 1952 to pay compensation eventually worth 3 billion deutsche marks (1.2 billion pounds) to Israel.

In 1992, two years after West and communist East Germany reunited, they agreed to provide further restitution.

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