

Descendents appeal to UN over latest Mamilla Cemetery demolitions

August 18, 2010, Jerusalem and New York– Yesterday, parties defending a 12th century Muslim burial ground in Jerusalem from disinterment and desecration provided new information on the latest demolitions by Israel’s Jerusalem Municipality to the United Nations and other international officials whom they initially petitioned on the matter in February 2010. The letter was sent by U.S. academic Rashid I. Khalidi on behalf of the *Campaign to Preserve Mamilla Jerusalem Cemetery* and Maria LaHood of the *Center for Constitutional Rights* to U.N. Human Rights Special Rapporteurs, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UNESCO Director General, and the Swiss Government.

The appeal details the destruction of at least 150 recently-renovated tombs and grave markers in the Ma'man Allah (Mamilla) Muslim cemetery by Municipality staff beginning on 4 August, and reports of further demolitions carried out at night without prior notice. The renovations had been carried out over recent months under the supervision of the Israeli *Shari'a* court-appointed caretaker of the cemetery, Mr. Mustafa Abu Zahra and with the acquiescence of the Municipality. “It is a matter of grave concern that Israeli authorities are continuing to treat the Islamic religious sites and cultural heritage in the Holy City of Jerusalem in a manner that amounts to further desecration,” the letter read.

The Mamilla Cemetery is an ancient Muslim burial ground and holy site believed to date back even further to the 7th century, when companions of the Prophet Muhammad were reputedly buried there, as well as Sufi saints and thousands of other officials, scholars, notables and Jerusalem families.

The latest wave of demolitions follows the disinterment of over 1,500 graves in 2009 to make way for a controversial “Museum of Tolerance”, funded by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which descendants have sought to halt through their Petition to the United Nations and other bodies.

Descendents also address reports that Israeli authorities are pushing ahead with plans to build a judicial complex on the site, which the letter says will “certainly and inevitably cause the desecration of thousands more graves and human remains in the process of infrastructure and construction works in the ancient cemetery.”

The families have been engaged in a lengthy legal and public relations battle in defense of the cemetery. On 10 February 2010, the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York filed a petition for urgent action with the U.N. to protect the cemetery from further desecration, followed by an Addendum filed on 10 June that updated developments in the case.

In light of the most recent developments, yesterday’s letter urges the concerned officials to “continue their investigation of this matter through on-site inspection, to demand that the Israeli Government cease its illegal actions in the cemetery in line with UNHRC resolution A/HRC/13/L.29 of 19 March 2010, and to consider the impact of the sustained desecration of an important historical and religious site in Jerusalem on the Petitioners and other interested individuals and groups.”

The Petition, Addendum and other documents may be consulted at www.mamillacampaign.org.

The *Center for Constitutional Rights* is dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Founded in 1966 by attorneys who represented civil rights movements in the South, CCR is a non-profit legal and educational organization committed to the creative use of law as a positive force for social change. Visit www.ccrjustice.org.

The Petitioners and the *Campaign to Preserve Mamilla Jerusalem Cemetery* which they initiated, is a wholly civil, volunteer initiative with no political coloring. All 60 individual petitioners are descendants of 15 of Jerusalem's most prominent and longest established families and have no relation with previous individual or institutional claimants in Israeli courts. In addition, the Petition was supported by 16 human rights non-governmental organizations, based in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem.

###