

Olmert presses for deal with survivors

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At a meeting with representatives of Holocaust survivors, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said "there is no doubt that the most troubling problem today is the thousands of survivors who were in the concentration camps and were never given support. Assistance to these people is something over which there is no argument."

Olmert opened the meeting, however, by criticizing some of the means used by protesters over the last few days.

"I must say that in this process some things have been said which could have been done without," Olmert said. "That's how I feel about some of the things that have been said about me and the government, and that some of the rhetoric and symbols used in the protest took matters beyond the aesthetics appropriate to the seriousness with which we must treat this matter."

Olmert said the issue "is important to all of us, even if there are different nuances that separate the representatives and the government."

He added that the government sees an agreement on this issue as a "high-priority moral mission."

Olmert directed the government team dealing with stipends to Holocaust survivors to work intensively on the issue with representatives of the survivors, and to come up with an agreement before their next meeting with him, scheduled for August 19.

One of the Holocaust representatives at the meeting, Noah Peleg, said he wanted to distance himself from some of harsher statements and acts of protest earlier in the week. "When I saw the sign, 'The Holocaust is still here,' my blood boiled," he said.

On Sunday, more than 2,500 protesters marched from the Knesset's Wohl Rose Garden to the Prime Minister's House in protest of the NIS 83 per month stipend that had been allocated to them in the budget.

Several of the organizations representing the survivors said that the protest had been effective in placing public pressure on the government to reevaluate their policy.



Ofer Gur, grandson of Holocaust victims, participates in the "March of the Living" from the Knesset to the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem as other demonstrators carry signs reading: "Sorry we survived" and "Olmert, don't kill my grandmother."

Photo: Ariel Jerozolinski

"The discussion over what certain people did at the protest is not where the focus should be. What is important is that the policy is being reevaluated," said Maj. General (Reserve) Uzi Dayan, chairman of the Tafnit Party.

Knesset Members from the Labor, Kadima and Likud Parties have all promised to press the issue in the 2008 budget by signing a bill by MK Zehava Gal-On (Meretz) that would guarantee a steady increase in the stipend payments to Holocaust survivors.

Among those attending the meeting were Finance Minister Ronnie Bar-On, Social Welfare Minister Yitzhak Herzog, Pensioners Minister Rafi Eitan and various representatives of the survivor organizations.