



الحملة الأهلية للحفاظ على
مقبرة مأمّن الله المقدسية
Campaign to Preserve
Mamilla Jerusalem Cemetery

CONTACT: Jen Nessel, 212.614.6449, jnessel@ccrjustice.org
David Lerner, Riptide Communications, 212.260.5000

Jerusalem Municipality Destroys Cemetery Headstones, Approves “Museum of Tolerance” Construction

U.S. Rights Group, Local Activists Urge Halt to Destruction of Ancient Cemetery

June 29, 2011, New York, Jerusalem –Working under cover of dark in the early morning hours of June 26, Israeli bulldozers entered an intact part of the ancient Mamilla Cemetery, Jerusalem’s oldest Muslim resting place, to destroy and dispose of nearly 100 grave markers in the revered site. The covert operation came just three weeks after a Jerusalem Municipal planning committee granted final permission for construction of a so-called “Museum of Tolerance” atop the cemetery to begin within 3 months. The bulldozers retreated hastily when their operators realized that they were being filmed by local media and activists, as can be seen in the coverage broadcast by Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxDqH3rrMPo&feature=player_embedded; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNdw2tQK0Cg&feature=player_embedded. Israeli officials have not commented on this highly provocative action which comes at a moment of high tensions owing to continued Israeli settlement expansion in the heart of Arab Jerusalem.

“The systematic desecration of our ancestors’ resting place and destruction of our cultural heritage by Israeli authorities confirms our feelings that Israel has no regard for the human rights of living Palestinians, or the peace of the dead. We are under no illusions that we are anything but third class citizens in the eyes of the Israeli state, that treats us and our history with utter contempt, while the international community stands silently by,” said **Dyala Hussein Dajani, a Jerusalemite whose ancestors are buried in the cemetery and who had joined a petition to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to halt the desecration.**

In the midst of these disturbing developments, the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) and the Campaign to Preserve Mamilla Jerusalem Cemetery have made fresh appeals for international action to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay and the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, to whom they originally addressed a February 2010 Petition. That petition was filed on behalf of a group of 60 individuals with ancestors buried in the cemetery and urged these United Nations officials and Special Rapporteurs to act to end the desecration of an ancient Muslim cemetery where distinguished Jerusalemite scholars, military officials, and families

were buried from at least the 12th century onwards. The cemetery is being destroyed in order to clear ground for a “Center for Human Dignity – Museum of Tolerance” to be built in its place by the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center. Israeli government plans to construct judicial buildings on the site are also under consideration. Excavation of the Museum site has already resulted in the disinterment of untold hundreds of human remains, the whereabouts of which Petitioners still are not aware of. The small part of the cemetery that still has gravestones has come under repeated attack, previously in August 2010 when the Jerusalem Municipality destroyed hundreds of renovated grave markers, and the latest destruction being this past week.

“The international community must call on Israel and the Simon Wiesenthal Center to stop destroying Mamilla Cemetery to construct a Museum that, contrary to being a beacon of tolerance, will instead be a symbol of discrimination, disrespect, and intolerance in the holy city of Jerusalem, the status of which is crucial to peace in the region,” said CCR Acting Legal Director **Maria LaHood**.

The continued desecration of the Mamilla Cemetery occurs in the midst of a broader Israeli offensive against Palestinians and their cultural heritage throughout Jerusalem. Assaults on the Palestinian neighborhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, where Palestinians are being kicked out of their homes to make room for Jewish settlers, construction on the privately owned site of the Shepherd’s Hotel, work at the Birket al-Sultan, excavations under ancient Muslim landmarks in the Old City, changing the names of the streets and historical sites in East Jerusalem from Arabic to Hebrew, for example, the Sultan Suleiman Street to King Eliahu Street or the Sultan Suleiman Cave to King Eliahu Cave, are all part of these efforts to erase the Palestinian presence in East Jerusalem.

“If allowed to continue, these assaults on the homes and property of the living and the graves of the dead will make any form of coexistence in the Holy City impossible.” said **Huda Imam, another Petitioner and Director of the Centre for Jerusalem Studies at Al Quds University**.

The Petition, Addendum and other documents are available at www.mamillacampaign.org and <http://www.ccrjustice.org/ourcases/current-cases/mamilla>.

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 *Campaign to Preserve Mamilla Jerusalem Cemetery* was initiated by the Petitioners, and 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. The Petition was also supported by 16 human rights non-governmental organizations, based in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Jerusalem.