

## JNF: Dark Side of a Dream

Ed O'Loughlin, Sydney Morning Herald



Jerusalem - The Jewish National Fund's blue collection boxes have long been a familiar sight in diaspora schools, workplaces, shops and homes - a chance for ordinary Jews to contribute their private cash to the Zionist dream.

These "pennies from the pushka" were used from 1901 onwards to purchase land for Jewish settlements in the Turkish and later British territory of Palestine, stepping-stones towards the creation of a Jewish state.

Yet sixty years after the birth of the state of Israel the JNF continues to thrive - and to generate controversy.

Last month Israel's parliament overwhelmingly endorsed the first stage of a bill which would formally allow the JNF to continue its established practice of barring non-Jews from leasing land and housing held in its name - 13 per cent of the area of Israel, much of it now prime real estate.

The Knesset bill has led to renewed accusations both in Israel and abroad that the JNF denies Israel's 20 per cent Arab minority access to what is in practice state land.

Under the headline "A Racist Jewish State" an editorial in the center-left Israeli newspaper Haaretz wrote that "the Jewish National Fund's land policy counters the interests of the state and cannot discriminate by law against the minority living in Israel ... Even though the Jewish National Fund purchased the lands for the Jewish people in the Diaspora, the State of Israel has already been established and these lands must now serve all its citizens."

Other Israeli commentators have pointed out that the move comes just as the Israeli government and international Zionist bodies are trying to stifle moves by trades unions in Britain and South Africa to boycott Israel as an apartheid state.

Most government figures, including Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, have avoided taking a stand on the issue. The JNF and its many supporters say that its activities do not discriminate against anybody.

It says that the forests and parks it has built in its more recent environment role - many on bulldozed Arab villages - are open to all visitors, whether Jewish or not, and that it employs many Arabs there. It says that Bedouin herders are permitted to graze their sheep and goats in JNF forests.

"[JNF] land has been legally purchased penny by penny over the last 106 years, by Jews from all around the world in order to fulfill the dream of creating a secure Jewish homeland in the land that was from biblical times, the Land of Israel," said a statement from the Fund's office in Israel.

"To use these donations for any other purpose would be to breach the trust and desecrate the sacrifices of these Jews, many of whom were later to perish in the Holocaust and whose sole desire was to use the little they had to secure land for the benefit and security of the Jewish People, who like any other legitimate purchasers of land anywhere in the world have the right to decide, subject to the laws of the land how to manage, maintain or otherwise utilise the land that they have legitimate title to."

But historians say that much of the JNF's almost 3000-square kilometres of real estate was not legitimately purchased from its legal owners.

At the birth of the state the JNF had only purchased less than 1000 sq kms of land from willing sellers, but Prime Minister David Ben Gurion then hurriedly and illegally sold it another 2000 sq kms which had been seized from native Arab owners displaced by the fighting or by military orders.

Ben Gurion's aim was to block any possible implementation of a recent United Nations resolution calling on Israel to allow the displaced Arabs to return to their homes and property in the new Jewish state.

The "transaction of millions", as it was known, left the JNF holding much of what is now Israel's most valuable urban real estate. It was also a way to channel diaspora money into the new state's depleted coffers.

The close ties between the state and the JNF became formal in 1961, when the JNF agreed to manage its lands in tandem with the state-owned Israeli Land Administration (ILA). In return the privately-owned JNF was given half of the seats on the board of the ILA, collectively owning and managing 93 per cent of the state of Israel.

In recent years the twin organisations have lost two high court challenges accusing them of blocking non-Jews from leasing homes and property (ILA and JNF land is only leased, usually to long-term tenants, and never sold as freehold).

But the courts would not apply the precedents generally, and rights groups say that in practice Jewish housing developments are still able to exclude non-Jews by means of committees which vet the "suitability" of would-be new residents.

In Palestinian territories under Israeli military occupation the JNF's commercial subsidiary, Himnuta, has used agents and middle men to covertly buy Arab property in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In 2005 Israeli police charged that some of this land was stolen from its Palestinian owners by corrupt Israeli officials and middle men who had forged bills of sale.

The new Knesset bill is sponsored by ultra-nationalist deputy Uri Ariel and was backed by a crossparty majority of 64-16 on its first reading. Its introduction was prompted by an order from Israel's attorney-general earlier this year directing both agencies not to discriminate against non-Jews, even when the property in question belongs to the JNF.

Despite its political/ethnic agenda in Israel the JNF continues to enjoy tax-free charitable status in many Western countries, including Australia, where it presents itself as a primarily environmental organisation.

Gordon Brown agreed to serve as a patron of the JNF shortly after becoming British Prime Minister, while its Australian branch recently co-hosted John Howard at a gala award ceremony to recognise his support for Israel.

In Israel the JNF has renamed a forest on the edge of the Gaza Strip after Mr Howard, and there are JNF forests in the Galilee named after former prime ministers Bob Hawke and Robert Menzies.

The Australian Jewish National Fund has adopted the Bnei Shimon community council near the southern Israeli city of Beersheva as its main fundraising project. AJNF's web site says it hopes to raise between \$5 million and \$8m dollars to provide water facilities to the council, which aims to double the number of Jews living amidst the area's marginalised and deeply underprivileged Israeli-Arab majority.

Nuri Elokbi, 65, a locally born Bedouin Arab, said that the Australian money is helping to build the new Jewish community of Givot Bar on his tribe's land, from which the IDF expelled it under false pretences when he was still a boy.

"I've heard that the Australians once did exactly the same thing to their original natives that the Israelis are doing to us," he said, manning his lone protest tent on a dirt road near Givot Bar. "The difference is that this is the modern times. Today it's supposed to be forbidden."

The chief executive officer of the Australian JNF, Rob Schneider, has strongly backed the Knesset's new bill to prevent non-Jews from having access to JNF land.

"It is a question of exercising ownership over land that was purchased historically by Jews for the benefit of Jews," he was quoted as saying in the Australian Jewish News.

Yet the Knesset bill has disturbed many Jews in other parts of the diaspora.

In the United States the leader of the Union for Reform Judaism, the world's largest Jewish congregation, condemned the move.

"It's very hard to imagine any circumstance where a Jewish minority in any diaspora country would accept with equanimity a bill that would forbid Jews from purchasing land," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the union's president.

"Therefore it is essential that when the Jewish majority in Israel exercises power, it extend to others the rights it always demanded for itself when we were in the minority."

Source: The Sun-Herald