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Still seeking justice for Holocaust victims

Holocaust survivors have not fared well over the past 11 years in their efforts to get European companies to compensate them for unpaid life-insurance policies bought before World War II. The survivors, whose numbers are diminishing, have had setbacks in the courts, at the White House and in Congress. Now, with a new congressional majority and a new team in the White House committed to change, there is hope that justice finally will prevail. The survivors' cause is more than just -- it is a grievous wrong that must be righted.

Survivors expected that the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims, which was created in 1998, would process and fairly resolve the insurance claims. However, when the commission concluded its work in 2007, it had paid out less than 3 percent of the estimated \$18 billion owed to victims and their families. That was acceptable to some, but not all, of the survivors. Most offensive is that the settlement, metaphorically, sweeps so much more under the rug.

The settlement has been upheld by the courts, including the Supreme Court, and strongly defended by the Bush administration. But those outcomes must not be allowed to stand. Some insurers are believed to have double-crossed their Jewish clients by turning their names or addresses over to Nazi authorities, knowing full well the consequences -- and profiting from the unpaid claims. It would be criminal not to identify any such perpetrators and assess penalties for their ill-gotten gains.

In 2000, a national coalition of survivor leaders founded the Holocaust Survivors Foundation, USA, Inc. to represent the interests of disaffected survivors. In a recent letter to President Barack Obama, HSF members wrote: 'Only a fraction of the funds actually looted was recovered by individual owners or heirs, and only a small portion of funds paid out for 'humanitarian purposes' have trickled down to meet the pressing needs of living Holocaust survivors.'

Citing 2004 data from the Jewish Federation system, HSF says that 25 percent of an estimated 174,000 Holocaust survivors in the United States live at or below the poverty line. An equal number have incomes so low that they are *de facto* poor considering the high cost of living in their communities. Most now are in their 80s and 90s. Many suffer with poor nutrition and inadequate shelter, healthcare, dental care, etc. Much worse is that most get little help in dealing with the long-term effects of starvation, beatings, disease, injury and other Holocaust-related deprivations.

Last year, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen proposed the Holocaust Insurance Accountability Act, which did not survive a divided Congress. Rep. Ros-Lehtinen said she would file similar legislation this

year. The bill would create a public registry that includes the names of Holocaust-era policy holders. This would allow victims and heirs whose policies have been destroyed to file claims. The bill also would explicitly give victims the right to sue for damages in court, a basic right that was lost in the recent court decisions.

The entire Florida delegation, Republican and Democrat, should support this legislation. Indeed, seeking fair redress for a historical wrong should be the business of all members of Congress, regardless of party affiliation. President Obama has many pressing items on his agenda, and Holocaust survivors, admittedly, represent a relatively small universe of people. However, creating a path to justice for Holocaust victims is an achievable goal, one deserving of bipartisan support and worthy of the attention of a president who understands the value of using power to achieve a greater good.