Swedish envoy: We cannot constitutionally remove exhibit

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The Swedish government is considering issuing a conciliatory note to bring to an end the crisis in relations between the two countries resulting from the controversial art exhibit in Stockholm, according to sources in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and hints offered by Swedish Ambassador Robert Rydberg. Israeli Ambassador Zvi Mazel regarded the exhibit as a glorification of suicide bombers - and protested by deliberately vandalizing the installation's presentation.

Rydberg emphasized that his government had no legal recourse to get the installation removed from exhibit, due to stringent freedom of expression laws in Sweden.

The scandal broke out after Mazel turned off the lights aimed at an installation piece made by former Israeli Dror Feiler, now a Swedish citizen, and his Swedish wife Gunnar. The Swedes - and the artists - say the installation was meant to condemn terrorism, but Mazel, backed by the government in Jerusalem, said the Feiler installation, part of an art exhibit accompanying a prestigious international conference on genocide, glorified the bomber - and violated an prior agreement with the Israeli government that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would not be part of the conference.

Jerusalem, in any case, is as interested as Sweden in seeing the episode closed, and will be satisfied with an appropriately conciliatory statement by Sweden, to enable the Israeli delegation to attend the conference as planned.

Diplomatic sources in Israel and Sweden Sunday emphasized that Mazel, who was backed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, will be told Monday at the Swedish Foreign Ministry that his behavior was "unacceptable," as a Swedish Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

During a meeting with Foreign Ministry Director General Yoav Biran and the deputy director general for Western Europe, Ran Kuriel, Rydberg heard an Israeli complaint about the installation and how its inclusion in the exhibit violated the agreement to keep the Middle East conflict out of the conference on genocide, which opens on January 26.

Rydberg expressed regret about the incident and hope that Israel does not boycott the event, and called the affair a "misunderstanding."

"The whole problem is based on a misunderstanding. A misinterpretation of a piece of art which may very well be in bad taste," Rydberg said after meeting the Foreign Ministry officials.

During the meeting dozens of terror victim's relatives demonstrated near the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, Israel Radio reported.

When Mazel pulled the plugs on the installation on Saturday night, Dror Feiler approached him angrily, shouting in Hebrew, "You're doing exactly what you do in Nablus. This is a free country and I can say what I want to say here, not like you in your apartheid country."

The diplomats Sunday worked on a formula to bring an end to the scandal. One possibility is a statement issued by the Swedish government rejecting any interpretation that its agreement to show the exhibit and installation was support for...
terrorists and emphasize its absolute rejection of such deeds, as well as expressing sorrow over the incident.

Despite the blunt statements of support from the prime minister and foreign minister, diplomatic sources in Jerusalem Sunday were not happy with what they called "the festival of support" for Mazel and his action. The sources said they worried Israeli diplomatic efforts to defend the government's policies toward the Palestinians and territories were adopting a strategy of "losing control," with diplomats dropping diplomatic niceties to adopt unusual and unconventional methods of protest that could harm the reputations of Israeli diplomats.

Rydberg: Artwork is example of bad taste

"The piece is about a Palestinian woman having murdered innocent civilians. It mentions the names of the tragic Israeli victims in Haifa. It is not a justification of suicide bombings. It is, in my view, an example of bad taste, but I think the whole issue has been blown out of proportion," Rydberg said.

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Mazel was unrepentant about damaging the "Snow White and the Madness of Truth" exhibit at Stockholm's Historical Museum. "My wife and I stood there and began to tremble," he told the Ynet site. "There was the terrorist, wearing perfect makeup and sailing placidly along the rivers of blood of my brothers and the families that were murdered."

The envoy told Haaretz that his protest was not spontaneous; he had planned the act after learning about the exhibit in the local press. He said he could not understand how an exhibition devoted to preventing genocide can feature a work that casts the murderer of 22 Israelis as Snow White. "In my eyes, that's not art; it's abominable," he said.

Curator of the Tel Aviv Museum, Doron Luria, said Sunday that he understood Mazel and that the artwork was an inferior piece of provocation. "The piece is simply not worth all of the excitement...I sympathize completely with the ambassador's actions. There is no place for such an idiotic piece in Stockholm," Luria said.

Feiler told Army Radio Sunday morning that his artwork was misunderstood. "The display itself is against violence. It can be summed up by a biblical quote: 'He who spills human blood shall have his own blood spilled by man,' and this is exactly what we need to put an end to. The Israeli ambassador caused diplomatic and political damage to Israel, and since he is an intellectual midget, his actions were similar to those of a stall owner in a third world country," Feiler said.

Historical Museum Director Kristian Berg said that the exhibit will remain on display. "You can have your own view of what this piece of art is all about, but using violence is never, ever allowed, and it is never allowed to try to silence the artist," he said.

Israeli MK Ahmed Tibi (Hadash) attacked the Foreign Ministry on Saturday for defending what he called Mazel's "reprehensible act of bullying."

"The government that uses bulldozers in the territories, demolishes houses and uproots trees also relies on bullying in its diplomacy," Tibi said.

Public Security Minister Tzachi Hanegbi on Saturday said that the Israeli ambassador should be awarded a citation for intentionally damaging the artwork.

"If there is a situation in which an ambassador should act in an undiplomatic manner, this is it," the Likud minister said, adding that he was "proud of the ambassador."

Hanegbi said that Israel's ambassador to Sweden behaved as he did in order to shock public opinion and to emphasize the insanity in which a mass murderer is portrayed as a heroine.

"This is the ambassador's duty, and in [Sunday's] government meeting I will call for him to be awarded a special citation for his actions, even if they were extreme," the minister said.