UNESCO Raps Iran Over Holocaust Cartoon Contest

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization recently filed a serious complaint with the Iranian government over its plan to hold a cartoon contest for caricatures denying the Holocaust.

Haaretz has learned that UNESCO director-general Irina Bokova plans to raise the issue when she meets Iranian President Hassan Rohani, who will be addressing the organization’s staff on Wednesday (January 27), International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

On December 17, Islamic Republic News Agency announced a contest for satirical cartoons relating to the Holocaust, to take place in June in Mashhad as part of the Teheran International Cartoon Biennial that has been held for the past 11 years under the auspices of the Teheran municipality. Organizers told the news agency that the winner will get a prize of $50,000, and added that it was not a display meant to deny the Holocaust or support it, but to enable questions to be asked about it.

Iran has held Holocaust-denying cartoon exhibits before, but the announcement of this year’s contest attracted considerable attention, coming only a month before the nuclear agreement with Iran and the removal of sanctions against it went into effect. Reports on the contest were published in the West two weeks before Rohani’s tour of European capitals, which began Monday when he arrived in Rome and continues tomorrow in Paris.

On January 4, following the reports in the Iranian press, Israel’s envoy to UNESCO, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, wrote to Bokova to bring the planned contest to her attention. UNESCO conducts activities throughout the world to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, combat anti-Semitism and promote Holocaust education.

“I urge you to condemn this contest and the Iranian authorities who enable it,” Shama-Hacohen wrote to Bokova, in a letter obtained by Haaretz. “It is incumbent to condemn this severe act of Holocaust denial, which badly offends the victims and survivors. It is time for UNESCO to demand accountability from the Iranian regime with regard to its malicious rhetoric, Holocaust denial and global negative activity.”

On January 15, Bokova responded, telling Shama-Hacohen that she was “deeply outraged” when she heard that once again Iran was holding a contest, “which makes a mockery of the darkest chapter in the history of humanity.”

Bokova wrote that the cartoon contest would only “further serve to incite hatred, racism, and discrimination. This goes against the objectives pursued by UNESCO to promote greater understanding and knowledge about the Holocaust.”

In her letter, a copy of which also reached Haaretz, she vigorously condemned the contest, saying she had sent a letter about the contest to the Iranian envoy to UNESCO in which she had expressed her deep concern. “I believe that all UNESCO action has never been so important than in these times of turbulence, as we face the rise of violent extremism and barbarous acts of hatred and anti-Semitism.”

Bokova has yet to issue any public condemnation of the cartoon contest, preferring instead to convey her message by diplomatic channels to both Shama-Hacohen and the Iranian delegate, due to Rohani’s planned visit to UNESCO headquarters on Wednesday. During their meeting, Bokova is expected to register her protest of the contest to Rohani and stress that the organization opposes it.