Berlin mayor torpedoes event honoring head of UN probe into Israel

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A Berlin event scheduled to honor the head of an ongoing UN probe investigating alleged Israeli crimes against Palestinians was called off this week after the city’s mayor pulled support for the city hall ceremony.

Mayor Franziska Giffey said the event planned for Tuesday by the non-governmental United Nations Association of Germany to fete Navi Pillay at the Rotes Rathaus, or Red Town Hall, was not representative of the views of Berlin’s denizens.

“Holding a presentation of this kind at the Red Town Hall, which is the town hall of all Berliners, is based on the assumption that the presentation meets with the broad approval of Berlin’s population,” a spokesperson for Giffey told The Times of Israel on Monday. “That is not the case for this event.”

Pillay is head of the three-person UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel. Critics say both Pillay and the inquest are biased against Israel, and the decision was hailed by Israel’s ambassador to Germany, who had pushed for the mayor to nix the award.

“In view of the circumstances, we have decided against having the German Association for the United Nations hold the event at the Red Town Hall,” Giffey’s spokesperson said. “In addition, we have decided against having a member of the Berlin Senate present the award.”

With the mayor and Berlin’s lawmakers avoiding the event, the prize ceremony was canceled altogether by the NGO, which did not respond to requests for comment.

According to the UN Association of Germany’s website, the organization “strives to inform the German public in an impartial and critical manner about the objectives, institutions and activities of the United Nations.”

Giffey’s volte-face came about as the result of a conversation she had with Israel’s ambassador to Berlin Ron Prosor last week, the diplomat told The Times of Israel.

Prosor relayed Israel’s concerns over Pillay and the UN probe on the sidelines of an unrelated event in Berlin on September 14.

“We made sure that she knew who Pillay is and I have to give it to her that she understood it very very quickly and decided that she’s not going to give the prize and no one in the parliament of Berlin is going to do that,” said Prosor.

Pillay, a South African jurist, was the United Nation’s High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014, during which she frequently criticized Israel’s actions in Gaza.

She was appointed last year to head a UN probe to investigate “all alleged violations of international humanitarian law and all alleged violations and abuses of international human rights law” in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, launched following the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Gaza-based terror groups.

Israel has previously said it will not cooperate with the commission, saying its members “have repeatedly taken public and hostile positions against Israel on the very subject matter that they are called upon to ‘independently and impartially’ investigate.”

Prosor described Pillay as “someone who really demonizes and delegitimizes the state of Israel day in and day out.”

According to UN Watch, a pro-Israel monitor, Pillay signed a petition in June 2020 organized by the South African Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (SA BDS) Coalition, entitled “Sanction Apartheid Israel!”

Then in a May 2021 lecture, she described Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians as “inhuman” and compared Israel to apartheid South Africa.

Earlier this year, she backed a member of the commission, Miloon Kothari, when he questioned whether Israel should be a member of the UN, and said social media was “controlled largely by the Jewish lobby.”

“To have Navi Pillay investigate Israel is like asking Putin to chair a commission of inquiry into Ukraine,”‘ said Prosor.

The commission is the first to have an open-ended mandate from the UN rights body, and critics say such permanent scrutiny shows anti-Israel bias in the 47-member-state council. Proponents support the commission as a way to keep tabs on injustices faced by Palestinians under decades of Israeli rule.

According to Prosor, Giffey explained that the decision to award the prize in the presence of Berlin’s mayor was made in 2019, before she came into office, and was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Israeli envoy called Giffey’s decision “really amazing.”

“I don’t remember many times when we go after something when the results were so effective,” Prosor said. “Both the mayor and also the organization itself decided not to give the prize.”

According to Prosor, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s accusation during an August meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin that Israel committed “holocausts” against Palestinians has made German officials far more attentive to Israel when it comes to bias and antisemitism in the international arena.

“What Abu Mazen did here, I think woke them up to basically understand that this is serious stuff,” Prosor said, using Abbas’s nom de guerre.