

Obama invokes Holocaust to confront Syria, Iran

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) Invoking the call of "never again" used on Holocaust Remembrance Day, President Obama pledged Monday (April 23) to confront human atrocities across the globe in countries like Syria and Iran.

Speaking at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the president announced that his administration's new Atrocities Prevention Board was meeting for the first time Monday. He also unveiled a new executive order that authorizes additional sanctions against Damascus, Tehran and their supporters who use technology, such as cell phone monitoring, to commit serious human rights abuses.

"These technologies should be in place to empower citizens, not to repress them," Obama said in a solemn, 25-minute address to a crowd of 400 that included survivors, activists and diplomats.

"And it's one more step that we can take toward the day that we know will come -- the end of the Assad regime that has brutalized the Syrian people -- and allow the Syrian people to chart their own destiny."

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who introduced the president, wondered aloud if the world has learned lessons from the Holocaust as the regimes of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continue.

"The greatest tragedy in history could have been prevented had the civilized world spoken up, taken measures in 1939, '40, '41, '42," he said. "Have we learned anything? If so, how is it that Assad is still in power? How is that the Holocaust's No. 1 denier, Ahmadinejad, is still the president, he who threatens to use nuclear weapons ... to destroy the Jewish state?"

Like Obama, he encouraged initiatives to prevent further atrocities. "Preventive measures are important," Wiesel said. "We must use those measures to prevent

another catastrophe."

Obama and Wiesel traveled together in 2009 to Germany's Buchenwald Concentration Camp. Wiesel survived Buchenwald but his father died there.

"'Never again' is a challenge to reject hatred in all of its forms, including anti-Semitism, which has no place in the civilized world," Obama said.

The president also announced he would posthumously award Jan Karski, a young Polish Catholic who gave eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust, with the Presidential Medal of Freedom this spring. Karski immigrated to the United States after the war and died in 2000.

Obama thanked Wiesel and other Holocaust survivors at the museum event for their perseverance and example.

"If you can continue to strive and speak, then we can speak and strive for a future where there's a place for dignity for every human being," Obama said. "That has been the cause of your lives. It must be the work of our nation and of all nations."