

Germany launches fund for victims

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By REGINE WOZNITSA

JEWISH LEADERS this week welcomed Germany's announcement of a multi-million-dollar Holocaust fund to compensate slave labourers as "an historic step," amid signs of pressure on France to address wartime issues.

On Tuesday, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder announced the establishment of the fund, with the participation of 12 leading German firms.

Reports indicated the initial contribution to the fund would be about \$1.8 billion. Payment to victims would begin by September 1.

The money will be distributed regardless of religion, meaning that payments are also likely to be made to Polish slave labourers who have not so far received compensation. Companies supporting the fund have suggested that recipients may number 300,000, but victims' organisations put the number far higher. Around 120 slave labourers are thought to live in Britain.

Ignatz Bubis, head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, said: "It is perhaps too much to call this a milestone, but it is the first time that German companies have acknowledged responsibility."

Elan Steinberg, of the World Jewish Congress, said the settlement was "a well-anchored basis for resolving outstanding Holocaust-era claims." But he said that attention should now be paid to the situation in France.

French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin has been urged to suspend a series of bank mergers until Holocaust claims are met. Shimon Samuels, of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Europe, is representing 140 French citizens and former residents in claims against French banks.