

Jewish Group Firm On Inviting War Crime Accused

Written by Rudi Prinsloo
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The South African Jewish Group Limmud is standing firm on its invite to war crimes accused David Benjamin, in the face of calls to cancel the visit.

"We reject all calls to withdraw Benjamin's invite to our conference... we believe its important for our delegates to understand different points of views and make up their minds on who is correct or not," Limmud South Africa co-chairman Dr David Bilchitz said on Friday.

The Muslim Judicial Council, the Media Review Network and the Congress of South African Trade Unions are urging the government to deny South African-born Benjamin the right to visit the country for Limmud SA's conference next week.

"The South African government cannot be complacent as Benjamin has, amongst other recorded war crimes, given Israel the legal go-ahead for the use of white phosphorous in its attacks against the citizens of Gaza during operation cast lead," the Muslim Judicial Council and Media Review Network said in a joint statement.

They described the invite as a "blatant Israeli public relations exercise" by Limmud SA.

"The use of white phosphorous in Gaza is illegal under international law, as the Geneva Convention bars its use against civilian targets. South Africa is a signatory to this convention."

The organisations said South Africa could not compromise its moral history as a defender of human rights by associating and hosting individuals such as Benjamin.

"The recent savage attacks on the Palestinian people with dangerous chemicals and heavy artillery, which were justified by lies about fighting 'terrorism', are reason enough to consider Benjamin an unwanted visitor," Cosatu said in a statement.

It charged that Benjamin was "guilty of the war crimes against humanity" further accusing him of defending Israel's "apartheid policy" against Palestinians and destroying "prospects for a peaceful return of Palestinian land to its original owners".

However, Bilchitz described the calls as unfair, explaining that Benjamin was not charged with committing war crimes.

"All operations in Gaza are currently a subject of the United Nations investigations. Under these circumstances... it is appropriate to hear his [Benjamin's] side of the story."

His organisation believed in freedom of speech, mostly when defending the rights of those to speak, "even if we have strong disagreements with them".

"The calls are against the mood of dialogue and engagement... censorship and silence is

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against the spirit of the mood and the new South Africa," he said.

Bilchitz said Benjamin would present Israel's perspective on International Law and its obligation in relation to a conflict like Gaza.

There would also be a "top" human rights lawyer, Shalomy Zachary, in the panel, to represent an alternative to Benjamin's perspective.

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