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Senior officials say they believe Latvian President Andris Berzins does not want to appear to be taking responsibility for acts committed by the Nazis together with local collaborators.

By Barak Ravid | Jul. 22, 2013 | 2:02 AM

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Latvia's President Andris Berzins in Riga. July 7th, 2013. Photo by Reuters

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Latvian President Andris Berzins has yet to confirm his participation in a memorial ceremony for Jewish Holocaust victims during President Shimon Peres' visit to Latvia next week. Senior officials in Jerusalem say they believe Berzins does not want to appear to be taking responsibility for acts committed by the Nazis together with local collaborators.

Peres, who is to visit both Latvia and Lithuania, will go to the Rumbula Forest, where 24,000 Jews from Riga were murdered in November-December 1941. A thousand German Jews, who had been transported by train to pits dug at the site, were also killed.

The massacre was perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen units of the SS, assisted by Latvian police and the Arajs Kommando – Latvian volunteers who answered to the Nazi Sicherheitsdienst (the SD) and conducted a number of pogroms and massacres of Jews and Nazis.

Aides to Berzins told the Israeli embassy that he will not be able to accompany Peres to the ceremony. A senior Israeli official said: "They told us he was going on vacation the day after Peres' visit to Latvia is over and he has a

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lot to do before, including a cabinet meeting.”

The Israeli embassy suggested moving the ceremony from the second day to the first day of the visit, right after the scheduled meeting between the two presidents. However, the Latvians said Berzins' schedule was still too full. The senior Israeli official said that the Latvians also said that, according to local Foreign Ministry protocol, the Latvian president is not supposed to accompany visiting presidents to ceremonies in Latvia.

The senior official said that, from conversations with the Latvians, it seemed that the reason for the refusal was not a crowded schedule or some technical matters, but rather political and national sensitivities. Over the years, the Latvian government has refused to recognize that Latvian citizens murdered in the Rumbula Forest were killed because they were Jewish.

In 1965, a number of young people from Riga received government permission to build a modest monument at the site. The inscription on it said that those buried there were citizens of the Soviet Union who were killed by the Nazis, without noting their Jewish origin. Over the years, the monument was defaced by local residents and the memorial plaques were stolen. Only in 2002 did the Latvian government restore the monument, and, for the first time, added Jewish symbols such as a menorah and Star of David.

To this day the Latvian government does not recognize the part played by Latvian citizens collaborating with the Nazis in the destruction of the Jews. Every year on May 16, Latvian veterans who fought in SS units hold a march to commemorate the date of the 1941 invasion of their country by Nazi Germany. In Latvia, it is explained that the event honors those who fought to liberate the Baltic states from Soviet occupation.

In March 2012, a local television interviewer asked Berzins whether a commemoration site should be established in Latvia to those who fell fighting with the Nazis. “It should not be ignored,” he said, adding that he saw no reason to deny the fact that “many people sacrificed their lives for the future of Latvia.”

Berzins said he did not view as war criminals Latvian volunteers who helped the Nazis, because they had been forcibly drafted.

The President's Residence has asked Yad Vashem to approach the Latvian government on the matter, and has also asked the Latvian embassy in Israel to convey the message that Peres would like Berzins to attend the ceremony.

The President's Residence said on Sunday: “There is an important educational message in both presidents attending the memorial ceremony marking the massacre in the killing fields of Rumbula.”

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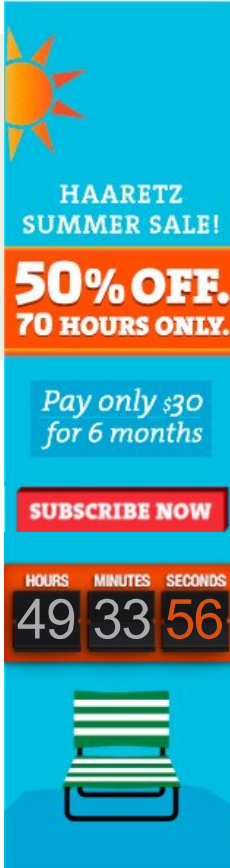
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