

Tourism minister gambles on Eilat casino

Casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson, who recently launched the world's biggest gambling complex, may have given up on hopes of establishing a casino in Israel, but Tourism Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch on Monday said he plans to push hard for a legal gambling house in the southern city of Eilat.

Aharonovitch made the announcement Monday at a meeting of the Knesset Economics Committee where he presented the ministry's work plan for 2008.

„A casino will do good for Israel and will bring in a lot of money that will be channeled to health, education and welfare,“ Aharonovitch told The Jerusalem Post Monday, before the committee gathered.

„A casino in Eilat will stop the southern city's tourism from fading, it will bring some of the tourists that prefer to go to Akaba in the east and the Sinai Peninsula and Egypt in the south where there are many casinos and fine hotels. But above all, a legal casino will give a death blow to the illegal casinos spread all over the country,“ he added.

When Adelson, the world's richest Jew, launched the Venetian Macau in August, he said after years of trying to open a casino here he had given up due to politics and an exhausting bureaucracy.

According to Aharonovitch, establishing a casino in Eilat must be done together with the building of a special police force that would be active in the casino surroundings and which would work to close down underground gambling institutions.

„Israelis love to gamble and they do it anyway in casinos in Taba, they take a cruise to Cyprus or a plane to Malta where

they spend their money instead of spending it here, where their money can return to the citizens in many ways. The police are busy running after crime families instead of dealing with the illegal gambling houses. Once we will have a legal casino, people will prefer to go there and the illegal casinos will disappear eventually.“

Aharonovitch is not alone in his desire for a casino in Eilat. Two weeks ago the municipality of Eilat, the Israel Hotels Association and Mifal Hapayis [Israel National Lottery] reached an agreement on the subject. Eilat's Mayor Meir Yitzhak HaLevy, Chairman of Mifal Hapayis Shimon Katzenelson and Chairman of the Israel Hotels Association Eli Gonen agreed that not only would a casino alone be built in Eilat but rather an entire entertainment and convention center that would include a casino but no accommodation facilities.

„This is the last project I intend to execute as a chairman of Mifal Hapayis before I retire. It will bring more money for the development of the city of Eilat, tens of thousands of more jobs and tens of thousands of visitors to the city every year, all at an investment of NIS 1 billion,“ Katzenelson told Finance Minister Ronnie Bar-On at the Hoteliers Conference in Jerusalem last month.

Religious MKs, however, are leading a campaign against Aharonovitch's initiative to which they say have joined secular and Arab MKs who think a casino should not be established in Israel at all.

„We know that a casino draws crime, prostitution and drugs and we don't need to have one in order to understand that, we can go and visit other countries and see for ourselves,“ MK Shlomo Benizri (Shas), who asked to set a discussion on the subject in the Knesset Committee, told the Post. „I simply care for the money of the Israeli citizens and their well-being. Many of them who gambled in casinos or even in Mifal Hapayis have lost their houses, families and got into debt because of the

gambling. They cannot convince me that this will bring in money.

„There are plenty of ways to bring money to Israel,“ he went on. „As a country that has many religious assets, we really don't need to let this evil inside. They say ,let's make it legal and that will solve the problem of the illegal gambling houses, so why don't we make prostitution, drugs and violence legal too, we cannot handle it so we might as well embrace it,“ Benizri said, promising to fight the initiative as long as possible.

Aharonovitch also told the committee he would refuse to establish a separate department to market Israel abroad as a tourist destination, an initiative made by Israel Hotels Associations following a professional report that was published a year ago by Ernst & Young.

„I believe the Tourism Ministry's internal marketing department works just fine and we don't need another authority to coordinate with,“ Aharonovitch told Gonen on Monday.

Gonen disagreed.

„If Israel plans to implement its entire tourist potential and reach 3 million tourists next year and more later on down the road it has to recognize that this area needs long-term plans, significant budgets and a professional marketing authority, such as exists in all major tourist countries, which will coordinate between the tourism ministry and the private sector,“ Gonen responded. „Israeli tourism is lagging behind Jordan and Egypt. It wasn't like this before and isn't suppose to be like this today.“