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Miami lawmaker wants Allianz ads pulled from NPR stations, CNBC

BY JAY WEAVER

jweaver@MiamiHerald.com

A Miami congresswoman is pressuring National Public Radio stations, the cable television network CNBC and others to stop airing sponsorships and advertising by a giant German insurer that collaborated with the Nazis.

U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who is pushing legislation that would allow Holocaust survivors to sue Allianz AG, has launched a letter-writing campaign aimed at blocking the insurer from advertising with any U.S. media until it pays off all Holocaust survivors' life insurance claims. During World War II, Allianz insured concentration camp facilities and sent money to the Nazis instead of rightful Jewish beneficiaries.

"Allianz is no ordinary insurance conglomerate," Ros-Lehtinen recently wrote to the media companies. "This company was involved in one of the greatest atrocities in recent history and has gone to great lengths to dodge acceptance of responsibility for its actions.

"It is far past time for Allianz to repay its debt to the survivors and families that suffered as a result of the Holocaust," wrote Ros-Lehtinen, the Republican lawmaker who heads the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Her letter campaign has caught the attention of CNBC and American Public Media Group, the Minnesota-based company that distributes Garrison Keillor's popular radio program, A Prairie Home Companion, and the business program Marketplace. CNBC and American Public Media officials told The Miami Herald that they are reviewing her request but have not made a decision on Allianz's advertising.

An NPR spokeswoman declined to comment, saying all stations are independent and make their own programming and underwriting decisions.

The congresswoman's media campaign is yet another sign of the simmering controversy over reparations to Holocaust victims, following her committee hearing this month on legislation that

would allow potentially thousands of survivors with life insurance claims to sue Allianz and other European insurers for damages in U.S. courts.

Her political move reflects the moral stamina of a Miami-based survivors' group that has not only sought the right to sue, but also put pressure on the same TV and radio stations to stop accepting Allianz's advertising and money.

In a September letter to Keillor, the Holocaust Survivors' Group USA reminded him of Allianz's notorious past with the Nazis and failure to make Jewish policyholders whole.

"To that point, we noted that the Allianz ad touts its business experience through 'affiliated companies in this country since 1896,' " wrote foundation president David Schaecter. "Here again, in an effort to cover up its past, Allianz is using your program to lure American customers by invoking the era of Teddy Roosevelt and John Phillip Sousa, when its true legacy is as Adolph Hitler's insurance company."

A spokesman for A Prairie Home Companion did not respond to a call and email for comment.

Ros-Lehtinen, whose survivors' legislation has more than 50 House sponsors, said her media campaign is not a "personal vendetta" against Allianz. "If they can spend money on advertising, surely they can repay insurance policies to Holocaust survivors," she said.

"I hope at the very least the media companies rethink their relationships with Allianz.

"I know there's a lot of consideration when these big companies make advertising decisions," she added. "We want them to understand there is a moral dimension applied to this thought process. It's not all about the bottom line."

For its part, Allianz has taken heat in news accounts in recent years, but insists it has the right to advertise its insurance and investment services.

"We are a company that employs 10,000 people in the United States," said Sabia Schwarzer, director of communications for Allianz of America, which includes Fireman's Fund and PIMCO among its companies. "It's part of conducting business that you advertise."

She added: "Is there anything that we could do to undo our ugly history? No, there isn't. It's a daily reminder that whatever business decisions we make, we need to be very responsible."

Schwarzer said the German insurer met its obligation to the vast majority of Holocaust survivors with unpaid claims through an international claims commission supported by both the U.S. and European governments, as well as Jewish organizations. Although it has completed its work, she said the state of New York also set up a system for victims seeking payments from Allianz.

"Generally speaking, the door for any unclaimed insurance policies remains open at Allianz," she said.

Allianz, with annual operating profits of \$8 billion, has struggled with its image in the United States because of its history of aiding the Nazis during World War II. The company's reputation took a major hit in 2008, when the public learned of its secret negotiations with the New York Giants and New York Jets for the naming rights to the Meadowlands Stadium.

The deal, which would have generated \$25 million a year for the two teams, fell apart amid public outcry when The New York Times and other media reported that Allianz insured concentration camp facilities and sent cash due to Jewish beneficiaries to the Nazis.

Three years later, the Miami-based Holocaust Survivors' Foundation USA adopted a grass-roots media campaign against Allianz when dozens of its members held a protest at a Boca Raton professional golf tournament sponsored by the insurance conglomerate. The protest garnered international media attention.

The group made more headlines in March when it threatened to protest a Miami Beach fundraiser by U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson if he did not fulfill his promise to sponsor legislation supporting its goal to sue Allianz and other insurers over unpaid life insurance policies. It was called off at the last minute when Nelson agreed to file the legislation.

Attorney Samuel Dubbin, who represents the South Florida survivors' group, said the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims, which completed its work in 2007, only obtained total payouts of \$250 million for about 14,000 claimants. The commission also issued 34,000 humanitarian payments of \$1,000 each.

He said experts estimate that Allianz, the Italian insurer Assicurazioni Generali and other companies sold a total of 879,000 life insurance policies to Eastern European Jews that have a present value of about \$18 billion.