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EYEWITNESS

By Nick Holdsworth

An official inquiry into the brutal expulsion of Sudeten Germans from the Bohemian city of Brno in the summer of 1945 is promising to break a conspiracy of silence over wholesale post-war ethnic cleansing that continues to sour Czech-German relations.

A city council taskforce of historians, lawyers, politicians and officials is sifting through the archives and rushing to gather statements from elderly witnesses to the forced exodus of between 20,000 and 35,000 ethnic Germans from Brno between May 31 and June 1, 1945.

Between 649 and 1,700 died or were killed during and after what has been dubbed the "death march" as Czech partisans and locals took their revenge for seven years of Nazi occupation. Sudeten men were left behind to work on forced labour projects.

The taskforce, which is being urged by pressure groups to offer a formal apology to the victims, comes at a time when Austria is pushing for compensation for those people forced across its borders. There are also fears that the expulsions could become a factor in Czech accession to the European Union.

The 11 member taskforce will consider the legal and historical aspects of an expulsion that came before the Postdam Agreement of the victorious powers, which gave legitimacy to the redrawing of post-war Europe's ethnic boundaries.

Political Scientist Stefan Wolff of Bath University, a specialist in forced population transfers, said: "The collective victimisation of ethnic Germans - and Hungarians - in Czechoslovakia has been a taboo both in official historiography as well as in school curricula for many years. Accepting that there have been wrongs in one's own history and taking responsibility for them are important steps towards reconciliation - for Czechs and Germans alike."

Taskforce historian, Libor Vykpoupil, of Masaryk University, said: "The question as to whether Brno bears any guilt is not a historical question, but an ethical one."

Masaryk University student Ondrej Liska, of Czech pressure group Youth for Intercultural Understanding, which urged Brno city council to set up the inquiry, said: "In my heart I can justify the deeds of the Czech people 55 years ago, but from a moral point of view I cannot. How we see these historic events is a moral issue."

Dr Jiri Löw, a Brno city councillor and taskforce chair, said "There are two issues - the legal question and the moral. If it were illegal we would need to consider compensation for the victims. Obviously we can express regret over what happened - there were innocents, such as the children, involved."