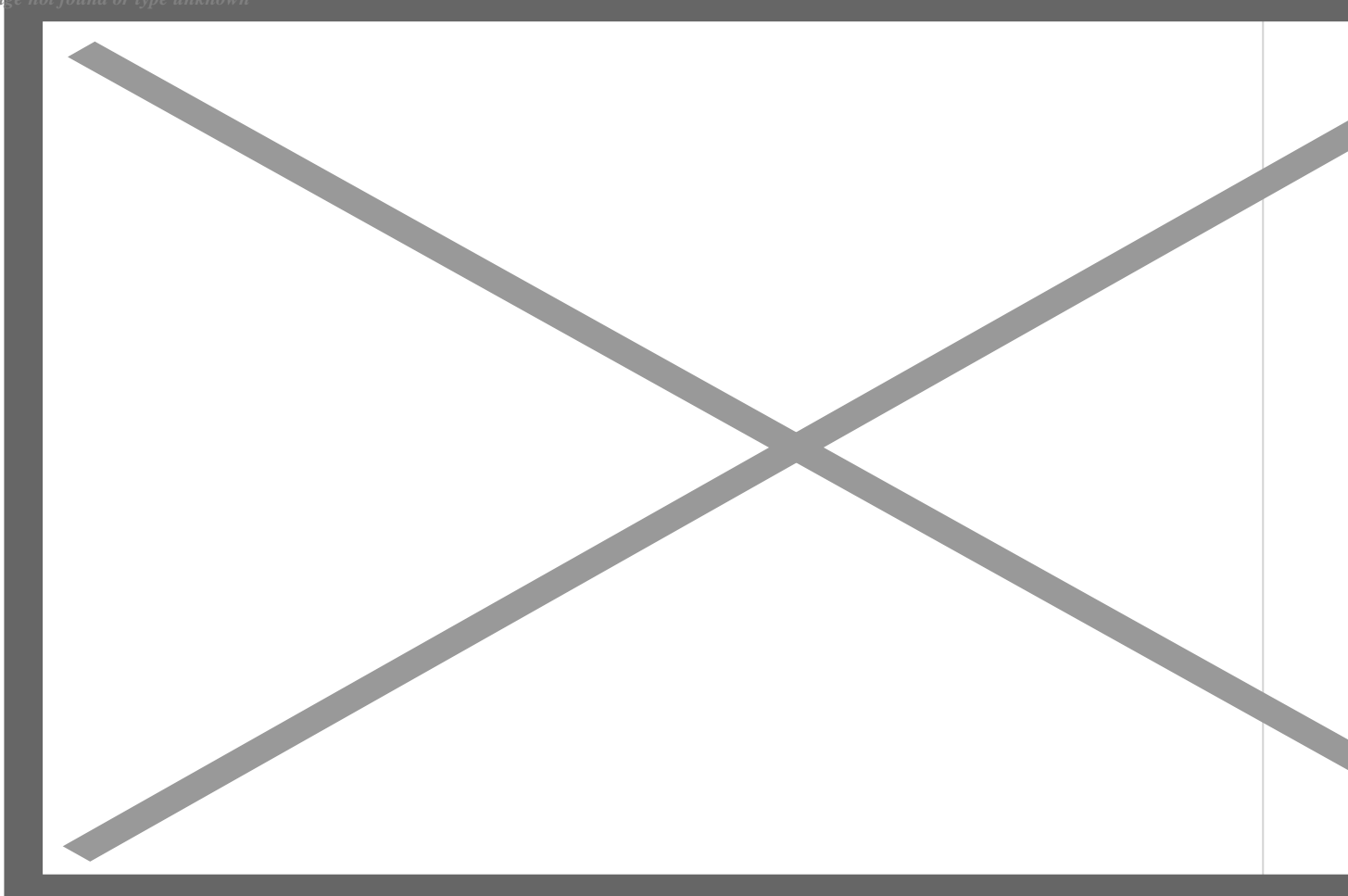


Israel's highly decorated founder accused of multiple rape cases

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Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, co-founder of the Israeli ZAKA emergency group, speaks at a conference in the occupied Jerusalem. (Photo: Times of Israel)

Tel Aviv, March 14 (RHC)-- The co-founder and chairman of Israeli ZAKA volunteer emergency response group has been accused of sexual assault, rape, and abuse by at least six people, and it is likely that there are many more victims.

According to an investigative report published by the English-language Haaretz daily newspaper, the allegations against Yehuda Meshi-Zahav were made by both men and women, some of whom were

minors at the time of the sexual offenses.

The report added that the prominent Haredi activist took advantage of his status, power, money, and even the organization he heads to commit sexual assault.

One alleged victim said Meshi-Zahav forcibly undressed her and raped her after offering financial aid. The woman said that while he forced himself on her, he threatened, "If you talk, a ZAKA jeep will run you over."

Another said Meshi-Zahav repeatedly abused him when he was a teen, only realizing years later he was his "escort, a prostitute in the full sense of the word."

Of the six allegations reported, the earliest took place in 1983, while the latest occurred in 2011.

The Haaretz report added that many residents of several ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in the occupied Jerusalem al-Quds were aware of Meshi-Zahav's actions; but did not say anything or report him to Israeli authorities.

At least one case reached Israeli police, but was closed in 2014 due to what was described as lack of evidence. The case also involved Meshi-Zahav's brothers, Moshe and Rami. Rami was eventually convicted of raping a relative and imprisoned, the report said.

Moshe and Yehuda were suspected of assaulting 16-year-old girls, and Yehuda was suspected of rape, which he denied. Moshe fled the Israeli-occupied territories after the case was opened, returned a few months ago, and died shortly afterward.

The investigators turned up one rape victim, a woman in her 20s, but she refused to file a complaint against Meshi-Zahav, as did the other women he was suspected of assaulting in the case. The investigation was closed and its existence was not publicized.

Several hours after the Haaretz report, Meshi-Zahav announced that he was stepping down from his role in ZAKA and also giving up the prestigious Israel Prize. He was declared a winner of the award earlier this month.

Earlier on Friday, Magen for Jewish Communities, a non-profit that works to support survivors of sexual abuse, and two members of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) had called for the Israel Prize to be revoked from Meshi-Zahav.

Meshi-Zahav has denied the sex abuse allegations as "baseless" and said the claims will cause "irrevocable damage" to his community standing.

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