



Sharp increase in demolitions threatens to destroy West Bank communities

UNRWA calls for accountability and an end to discriminatory practices

Statement by UNRWA Spokesman Chris Gunness

Jerusalem, 02 Aug: Demolitions by the Israeli authorities in the West Bank have escalated alarmingly. Figures released today by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) show that 700 people were displaced in the first six months of 2011 (excluding July), compared with 594 in the whole of 2010.

UNRWA is concerned that 15 per cent of those displaced are Palestine refugees. The vast majority of demolitions have been carried out in Area C, the 60 per cent of the West Bank which is under full Israeli control for security, planning and zoning policy over where building can take place.

June and July saw a sharp increase in the number of demolitions of Palestinian homes and infrastructure, according to the latest UNRWA figures. In June alone 132 structures were demolished. This is more than the total for the previous three months. In June and July, 605 Palestinians were displaced or affected by demolitions, more than half of whom are children.

Under a planning system, condemned as discriminatory by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, Israeli authorities have allocated only 1 per cent of Area C for Palestinian development. This means that it is virtually impossible for a Palestinian to obtain a permit for construction, while Israeli settlements receive preferential treatment in the allocation of water and land, and approval of development plans.

Most demolitions have targeted already vulnerable Bedouin and herding communities. In many cases, demolition orders have been issued to virtually the whole community, leaving these communities facing a real danger of complete destruction.

The UN estimates that there are more than 3,000 demolition orders outstanding in Area C, including 18 issued to schools. None of these are UN schools. In addition to demolitions, Israeli restrictions on movement, confiscation of land and resources, revocation of residency rights, harassment from the Israeli military, settler attacks and lack of protection against settler attacks, lead to displacement in the West Bank.

Most recently, in July 2011, 19 Bedouin families – 127 people – decided to move from their Area C homes under fear of further settler attacks. This followed the detention of three community members for stone throwing against settlers who forced their way into the Bedouin's homes. The community has made clear to UNRWA that it is the lack of protection by the Israeli authorities against settler attacks which forced them to leave their homes.

The escalation in demolitions and recent settler activity in areas targeted for settlement expansion is a cause of great concern. This practice, combined with other Israeli policies in Area C, has exacted a terrible price from the most vulnerable communities in the West Bank, driving already poor families deeper into poverty. There is growing evidence that it is destroying the very fabric of these communities and ultimately contributing to a demographic shift which is changing the ethnic make-up of the West Bank.

Along with other UN agencies, UNRWA calls on the Government of Israel, among other measures, to end the displacement and dispossession of Palestinians in the oPt, including immediately ceasing demolitions of Palestinian-owned structures, until Palestinians have access to a fair and non-discriminatory zoning and planning regime. We call for transparency, accountability and an end to policies and practices that violate Israel's obligations under international law.

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