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Israel: New government must scrap plans to forcibly evict Bedouin

Israel's new government must drop a proposed law that would lead to mass forced evictions of Bedouin people and instead pursue legislation to protect Bedouin housing rights, Amnesty International said, as the Ministerial Committee on Legislation is due to consider the proposal on Sunday.

The draft "Law for Regularizing Bedouin Habitation in the Negev - 2012", approved by the previous government, threatens at least 30,000 Bedouin in the country's southern Negev/Naqab desert with forced eviction from their communities, which have never been officially recognized by the Israeli government.

"Forcibly evicting tens of thousands of Bedouin from communities where they have lived for generations cannot be justified in the name of economic development or any other reason – Israel's new leaders must have the courage to venture where previous governments have ignored human rights standards," said Ann Harrison, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"What the proposed law does is send the Bedouin communities into a human rights desert by stripping already vulnerable citizens of legal safeguards against house demolitions and forced evictions. This blatantly violates international law."

The proposed law is still on the table despite a chorus of objections to the plans raised during consultations with Bedouin communities and local human rights organizations, as well as in two letters from Amnesty International which have gone unanswered.

Bedouins in Israel face endemic discrimination and traumatic house demolitions have been taking place for years, resulting in forced evictions. If the law is passed it will open the doors to much more of the same.

But instead of scrapping the eviction plans altogether, the law merely proposes to stagger the implementation of demolition orders.

"Far from giving Bedouins a legal safeguard, this proposal just adds insult to injury," said Ann Harrison.

The officials responsible for the eviction plans repeatedly highlighted the case of the excluded village of Wadi Na'am as an example of how the Bedouin would benefit from relocation under the proposed law. Residents of Wadi Na'am are willing to leave their village due to the dangerous conditions caused by a nearby chemical factory and other industries. But they are still eager to preserve their agriculture-based lifestyle.

The first Wadi Na'am residents moved there in the 1950s after being expelled from their ancestral lands in the southwestern Negev/Naqab desert.

Residents of the village have told Amnesty International that they explicitly object to the government's plan to relocate them to Segev Shalom, to a location within range of the chemical factory, where they would be unable to continue tending livestock. Their preference would be to return to their ancestral lands.

Wadi Na'am is just one of dozens of Bedouin villages which would be affected under the proposed development plans.

"If the relocation of Wadi Na'am residents is being offered as the government's best-case scenario, what must we fear for the other excluded villages?" said Ann Harrison.