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Israeli authorities must stop demolitions of Palestinian homes

Amnesty International is calling on the Israeli authorities to end house demolitions which leave thousands of Palestinians living in daily fear of eviction from their homes.

A new briefing, *As safe as houses? Israel's demolition of Palestinian homes*, reveals the extent to which Israeli forces are destroying homes and other structures in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, claiming they have been built illegally.

According to the UN, in 2009 more than 600 Palestinians – over half of them children – lost their homes after they were demolished on order from the Israeli authorities.

“Palestinians living under Israeli occupation face such tight restrictions on what they can build and where that their right to adequate housing is being violated,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The Israeli authorities are putting Palestinians in an impossible situation. Whatever choice they make, they face homelessness.

“The majority of people are denied building permits by Israel, even after lengthy and expensive bureaucratic and legal processes, so they have little choice but to go ahead without official permission. But as they do so, they know that these buildings may soon be flattened by Israeli bulldozers.”

Demolitions are generally carried out with no warning of the date, giving no opportunity for Palestinians to salvage their possessions or find elsewhere to shelter. The UN has estimated that some 4,800 demolition orders are pending.

Under Israeli law, evicted families are not entitled to alternative housing or compensation, meaning many would face homelessness and destitution were it not for relatives, friends and charities.

While homes are often targeted, Israeli authorities have also issued demolition orders against Palestinian schools, clinics, roads, water cisterns, electricity pylons, sheds and animal shelters.

Palestinians living in the tiny village of Khirbet Tana in the Jordan valley have had to rebuild their homes twice in five years.

In 2005, Israeli authorities demolished the village school as well as a number of homes, animal sheds and water cisterns.

The villagers rebuilt their homes but on 10 January 2010, Israeli forces returned. They demolished the homes of 100 Palestinians, leaving 34 children homeless, as well as the village school for a second time. They also destroyed 12 sheep and goat pens, the main source of income for the village.

Raeda Nasasreh, a 24-year-old mother of two, told Amnesty International: “The army jeeps came at six in the morning; people saw them in the valley and started taking their belongings out of the houses.

“We didn’t have time to finish milking the ewes. They demolished everything here; by 9:30 they were finished.”

In October 2009, Israeli forces destroyed the home of Rida Nimr and her husband Nimr Ali Nimr in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Jabal al-Mukabbir. Three generations of the family, including five children, were left homeless.

“Some 30 police and special forces, accompanied by three bulldozers driven by civilian contractors, arrived while the children were still sleeping. The police rapidly surrounded and closed off the area,” said Rida.

“The demolition force only took a few pieces of furniture out of the house before its demolition and did not allow us to take out anything except, after pleading, a laptop belonging to our daughter Amal which she needs for her university studies.”

Amnesty International is calling on the Israeli authorities to immediately end all demolitions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), including East Jerusalem.

They should also transfer responsibility for planning and building policies and regulations to the local Palestinian communities.

In addition, the Israeli authorities must stop the construction or expansion of Israeli settlements in the OPT as a first step towards removing Israeli civilians living in such settlements.

“Demolition and eviction orders do not just destroy people’s homes. They also take away their possessions and their hopes for a secure future,” said Philip Luther.

Background

More case studies can be found in the report.

The right to adequate housing is an essential component of the right to a decent standard of living. When fulfilled, it can provide a foundation on which other rights are better able to be realized, including the rights to family, to work and to education.

Israel is a state party, and bound by, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which explicitly guarantees the right to adequate housing without discrimination, (Article 11.1).

As the occupying power, the actions of Israel in the OPT are also bound by the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War to which Israel is a signatory. Article 53 prohibits destruction of property that is not justified by military necessity. The UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice have both stated that the Fourth Geneva Convention applies to the OPT.