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Quartet action needed to keep Palestinian villages on the map

Demolitions have tripled in three years, with villages in Hebron Hills now under threat

The government of Israel's eviction and demolition plans for 13 Palestinian villages in the Hebron Hills [1] come as demolition and displacement rates have hit a three-year high, adding to the uncertainty about the future for Palestinians living in the Israeli-controlled Area C of the West Bank, a group of 30 aid, development, and human rights organizations warned today.

The communities are targeted for demolition or expulsion from the area as the government of Israel plans to use the land for the expansion of an Israeli settlement and to create a closed military zone [2].

The organizations are calling on the Middle East Quartet, who will be meeting informally on Monday, 24 September in New York, to visit the affected communities and address the violations that are happening on the ground. The agencies said the Quartet needs to move beyond words and deliver a concrete plan of action that keeps Palestinian families in their homes while working to ensure all parties are meeting their obligations under international law. The Quartet's plan must, therefore, press the government of Israel to immediately reverse policies and practices that violate international human rights and humanitarian law and lead to forced evictions, forced displacement, and demolitions in Area C.

Nishant Pandey, Country Director for Oxfam said:

"The Quartet has issued 39 statements condemning the government of Israel's violations of international law, yet the number of people displaced by unlawful demolition of Palestinian homes continues to increase at an unprecedented rate. Words have so far failed to bring meaningful change to people's lives and the Quartet must now show Palestinians and Israelis that it is committed to working towards a just, durable peace."

The demolition and eviction plan for the Hebron Hills would leave 1,650 Palestinians homeless [3], without access to the land they need for farming and raising animals to feed their families. Many of them are already living in substandard conditions because of Israeli restrictions on Palestinian building in Area C.,

Ann Harrison, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director for Amnesty International said:

"The Quartet must face the facts on the ground in the occupied West Bank: escalating demolitions and whole villages threatened with forced eviction. Ensuring respect for international human rights and humanitarian law should be the cornerstone of the Quartet's work. Only if it confronts these ongoing violations head on can the Quartet contribute to a just and sustainable solution."

The threat to villages in the Hebron Hills comes as new figures reveal that the rate of demolitions has tripled in the past three years, with the average number of people displaced increasing 98 percent during this same time [4].

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said:

"It's time for the Quartet to stop the euphemisms: Israel's demolitions of Palestinian homes and other structures without military necessity violate its obligations as an occupying power. The Quartet should press the government of Israel to end these violations immediately."

The agencies said that the increasing concerns of Palestinians in areas which they were working with had prompted them to speak out now. Oxfam has recently had a mobile veterinary unit impounded in the area and was given notice that it is not permitted to enter the villages where it is working to help 148 families earn a decent living raising goats and sheep. A number of other agencies have received demolition or stop work orders for aid projects in the villages.

David White, Country Director for CARE International said:

"The families we work with are terrified that any day they could lose their homes and the health clinic provided by CARE International. Tomorrow they could wake up and everything they have worked their entire lives to build could be gone. We are providing people with essential health services, but no amount of humanitarian or development assistance can help people overcome this feeling of despair. The Quartet needs to put forth a plan of action that brings the security people desperately need to lead a dignified life."

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EDITORS NOTES:

[1] The 13 villages include the Palestinian village of Susiya, which has received demolition orders due to its proximity to an adjacent Israeli settlement, and 12 nearby villages in an area that has been designated by the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) as a closed military zone for the purpose of military training, referred to as "Fire Zone 918." The 13 Hebron Hills villages are all located in Area C, which is the 60 percent of the West Bank where Israel controls planning and zoning, as well as security.

[2] In total, more than 18 percent of the West Bank, which is equivalent to the amount of land in which the Palestinian Authority exercises civil and security control, has been designated as a closed military "fire zone," rendering the areas effectively off limits for Palestinians. These "fire zones" are almost exclusively located in Area C, with approximately 5,000 Palestinians from 38 villages living within these areas, leaving them at increased risk of physical harm as well as eviction and demolition.

[3] 150 Palestinians are under threat of being displaced from Susiya, where the ICA has handed over demolition orders for more than 50 structures including homes, a community center, solar panels and renewable energy systems, animal shelters, and other income generating structures. Another 1,000 Palestinians have been issued orders of eviction from 8 villages within "Fire Zone 918." An additional 500 people from the 4 other villages within "Fire Zone 918" are at increased risk of displacement due to demolition orders against their homes. In recent months, some structures including aid projects like (windmills, water cisterns, animal pens, and tents) have already been demolished in Susiya and "Fire Zone 918."

[4] From 2009 to 2012, the monthly average of demolitions in the West Bank rose from 23 to 64, while the monthly average number of people displaced by Israeli demolitions of their homes rose from 52 to 103.