

A new wave of demolitions

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Early one morning in April, the Israeli army arrived in the village of Al Khadr, near Bethlehem. They were heavily armed and accompanied by demolition equipment. Soon after arriving, they turned the family home of Ali Salim Musa, his wife and their seven children into a pile of rubble and twisted steel (see photo).

Soon afterwards, the family's lawyer arrived with an Israeli court order to postpone the demolition. But it was too late.

"When we arrived at the place where the house had been, women were crying aloud, men were staring with resignation at the ruins," reported human rights monitors working for EAPPI.

"A little boy appeared, arriving home from school and crying again and again: 'Where is my home?'"

April was a relatively slow month for house demolitions in the West Bank. But there has been a significant surge in destruction of Palestinian properties in the West Bank by the Israeli army enforcing policies of the occupation (see chart below).

On one day in July, the army made over 100 people homeless in Al Farisiye, a remote Bedouin community in the Jordan Valley.

Israel rarely gives building permits to Palestinians in the large areas of land east of Jerusalem that it annexed after 1967, or in Area C, the 60% of the occupied West Bank in which Israel directly controls urban planning. This forces Palestinians to build without permits, knowing that their homes may be demolished.

The new wave of demolitions followed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's July visit to Washington. NGOs fear that if American pressure on the Israeli government slackens as possible peace negotiations begin and November's US congressional elections approach, further demolitions are likely.

In early July the Israeli press reported government orders for West Bank military officials to "increase enforcement against illegal Palestinian construction" in fully Israeli-controlled areas of the territory.



The remains of the Musa family home in Al Khadr.

(Photo: Stefan O., EAPPI)

"Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property... is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations."

Article 53, 4th Geneva Convention, 1949.

Days later, the Israeli army flattened 74 structures in Al Farisiye, including 26 residential tents. Agencies said at least 107 people lost their homes - over half of them children. Al Farisiye has already suffered years of harassment.

The structures included water tanks and irrigation pipes provided by humanitarian agencies.

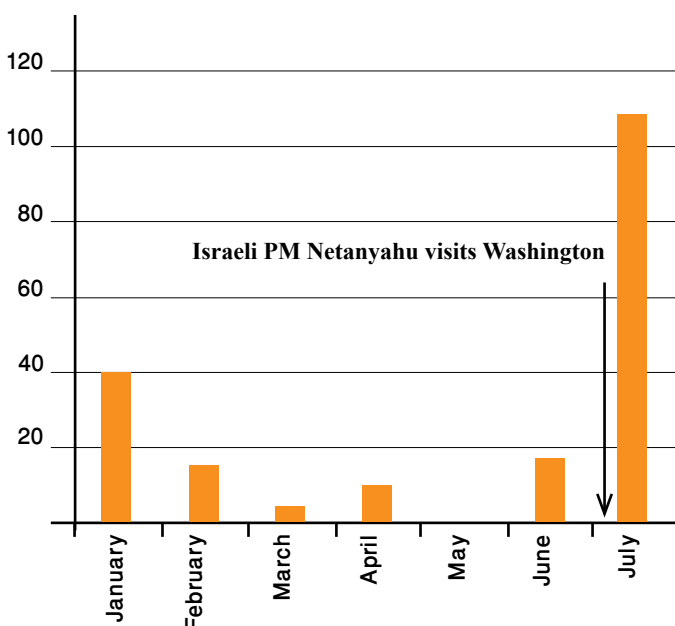
"The hillside looked as if a natural disaster had taken place. 'With no access to shelter, water or fodder for their goat and sheep herds, an entire community is being forced to leave its land,'" said a spokesperson for Oxfam, after visiting the site.

In early August, the army returned to demolish emergency tents donated by humanitarian agencies.

The destruction of homes can induce extreme psychological trauma, especially in women and children, and severely impacts livelihoods and access to basic services, said the Displacement Working Group (DWG), a forum of humanitarian agencies.

"Humanitarian assistance cannot replace a broken home or mend the trauma suffered by children and adults upon seeing their homes reduced to rubble," said the DWG.

"The solution must be to stop these demolitions, for once and for all."



Demolitions of Palestinian-owned properties have risen sharply since the start of July.

Source: The Displacement Working Group (DWG)



Before... and after. This house in Beit Hanina, East Jerusalem, housed an entire Palestinian family until it was demolished in 2009. House demolitions are now rapidly increasing. (Photos: G Boo, Ecumenical Accompanier in Jerusalem)

Violating the right to a home

For Palestinians in the West Bank, building a house is no simple task. First, they must save or borrow enough money to do so, as western-style mortgages are not usually available. The second step is to apply for construction permits.

For the past ten years, Daoud Nassar and his family, Palestinian Christians from near Bethlehem, have run a project called “Tent of Nations” on their West Bank farm. Israeli, Palestinian and international volunteers do bridge-building activities here, and a sign next to the gate reads, “We refuse to be enemies.”

But in May, the Israeli courts ordered the Nassars to demolish nine of the structures they used for this work, as they had been built or renovated without permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain. Israeli soldiers came in person to issue the orders, condemning tents, animal shelters and a pair of eco-friendly composting toilets.

“One officer was writing the demolition orders and the other was taking pictures. Soldiers were following them everywhere and pointing their guns at us,” Daoud told EAPPI.

Daoud’s family has owned this land since Ottoman times, but Israel will not allow them to build on it. Since 1967 when Israel

occupied this area, illegal Israeli settlements have spread across the surrounding hills.

“We were very frustrated,” said Daoud. “You are on your own land, but you cannot do anything. You have no rights, even to go to the toilet.”

A campaign by friends of the Tent of Nations apparently persuaded the authorities to put off the demolitions, but the orders are still pending.

Stringent planning restrictions mean that many Palestinians invest their life savings into building homes that are, from day one, threatened with demolition. Israeli settlements, meanwhile, have blueprints for far-reaching expansion.

“The use of the policy of house demolitions in the territories occupied in 1967 is merely a continuation of the same policies that began in 1948,” said Jeff Halper, director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD).

“The rationale is to confine Palestinians to small enclaves of the country, and ultimately to make life so difficult that they leave.”

Demolitions are the flip side of settlement expansion. As Israeli settlers establish their dominance over land expropriated from Palestinians, demolitions make Palestinians ever less secure and further weaken the possibility of a viable Palestinian state, along with chances of peace.

The growing rate of house demolitions highlights the need for peaceful actions, worldwide, to end the occupation and bring justice to Israel and Palestine.

“We are people who believe in justice and we have to keep our spirits high. We want to overcome evil with good,” said Daoud.

“This is our Christian way of non-violent resistance.”

House demolitions and international law

As the occupying power, Israel’s actions in the West Bank are subject to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which states that: “any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property... is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.” (Article 53).

International human rights law requires states to ensure that all persons under their jurisdiction enjoy full rights to housing, health, education and water. This applies not only to the states’ citizens but also to civilians in occupied territories.

International law specifically prohibits the deliberate displacement of civilian populations in whole or in part, unless absolutely necessary for the security of civilians or for imperative military reasons.

Further reading...

The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD)

An excellent resource on the phenomenon of demolitions in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), and the chance to participate in house rebuilding projects - www.icahd.org

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)

Authoritative, up-to-date information on the humanitarian situation in the oPt - www.ochaopt.org