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Israel: House demolitions -- Palestinians given "15 minutes to leave..."

"Ahmed Mahmoud Abu Awais watched in horror as more than 100 armed border police, accompanied by bulldozers, arrived at Isawiyeh in East Jerusalem on 26 January and started destroying the four-room home housing 14 members of his family. The family was given no time to get their furniture out. About 100 local people gathered and started to throw stones. The border police used batons and shot rubber-coated metal bullets at close range, killing Zaki 'Ubayd, a 28-year-old father."

Case study from Amnesty International's research mission - June 1999

Thousands of Palestinians, like Ahmed, live under constant fear of their home being demolished by the Israeli authorities because they have no chance of getting a building permit -- even on land that has belonged to their families for generations. Without a permit their home is effectively illegal.

"There is normally no warning of the time or date of a house demolition; the family may only have 15 minutes to take out what belongings they have before the furniture is thrown into the street and their home bulldozed," Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

Amnesty International delegates, including Anthony Coon, an independent expert on international town planning, carried out a research visit to Israel and the West Bank in May and June 1999. The findings, published in the new report, *Demolition and dispossession: the destruction of Palestinian homes*, clearly reveal that Israeli law and military orders are based on two policies -- one for the Palestinians and one for the Israelis.

"The Palestinians are targeted for no other reason than because they are Palestinians. The demolition of their houses is in no doubt linked with Israeli discriminatory policy to restrict Palestinian development to existing urban areas," said Anthony Coon.

"For Israelis, it is a different story. They have few problems obtaining building permits and even if they build homes without authorization, their houses are rarely, if ever, demolished."

Amnesty International believes that the policy of house demolitions is a grave human rights violation against the Palestinian residents of the West Bank.

Hopes that demolitions of Palestinian homes would end with the signing of the 1993 Oslo peace agreement have proved unfounded. Since 1995 around 5,000 people, including 2,000 children, have been made homeless by the bulldozers. Recently the new Israeli Government of Ehud Barak set up an interministerial committee to look at house demolitions in the West Bank, but the bulldozers have not stopped.

In November 1999, for example, two houses in East Jerusalem were destroyed. Currently, in East Jerusalem alone, 10,000 homes, housing a third of the Palestinian population, are threatened by demolition orders.

“The calamity facing individuals and families whose homes have been demolished is immense. Often their homes are all they have,” Amnesty International stressed. “When troops arrive families are often too outraged and terrified to rescue their possessions in the short period given by the soldiers to evacuate their home.”

“The trauma of dispossession can lead to family bitterness and breakup. Many have no choice but to reside with relatives in overcrowded conditions or to live in tents,” the organization added.

“From Oslo to now there has not been a single one of my cases where a permit for building a house in Area C has been granted....” a Palestinian lawyer told the Amnesty International delegation during their visit.

Area C comprises nearly three-quarters of the land area of the West Bank and includes many of the opportunities for urban and rural development. However, Amnesty International delegates were told, not once but many times by the representatives of the Civil Administration in the Occupied Territories, that the policy of the military government has been, since 1995, *“not to grant building permits for new buildings for Palestinians in Area C”*.

“By targeting Palestinians for house demolitions and denial of building permits, the Israeli government has violated its obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law which it has promised to uphold,” Amnesty International said. “This policy should be ended immediately.”

Background

During Amnesty International’s research visit, the delegation met representatives of Palestinian and Israeli non-governmental organizations, lawyers, town planners and engineers. They carried out on-site visits, and met victims of house demolitions and land seizures, as well as government officials in Israel’s Civil Administration.

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For more information please see report *Israel and the Occupied Territories: Demolition and dispossession: the destruction of Palestinian homes* (AI Index: MDE 15/59/99) or call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>