

OPT: Demolitions, drought and displacement in West Bank Area C

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RAMALLAH, 18 February 2011 (IRIN) - Demolition of livelihood structures and drought are hitting already impoverished Palestinian communities living in Area C of the West Bank hard this year, according to UN agencies and international aid organizations working in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt).

Demolition of livelihood structures - including commercial structures, educational facilities, wells, water cisterns, water storage tanks, farmland and animal pens - by Israeli authorities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem increased by about 85 percent in 2010 and so far in 2011, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) told IRIN.

"Over 12,500 Palestinians were affected by the demolition of livelihood structures in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 2010," Ramesh Rajasingham, head of OCHA in Jerusalem, told IRIN, and "the majority of people effected, were impacted by the demolition of water cisterns in Area C."

During 2010, 21 cisterns were demolished by the Israeli army, of which 9 were built thanks to funding from international donors. Of those demolished, 20 were in Hebron and one in Bethlehem, and two were built before 1948, OCHA says.

Cisterns - used to collect rainwater - are the only water source for livestock in these herding communities and the demolitions create economic hardship for thousands of people. During summer cisterns are also a domestic water source.

Forced to buy costly fodder, water

The West Bank is facing a rainfall shortage this season (September-March), which decreases grazing pastures and water levels in cisterns, forcing herders to purchase costly fodder and water from private tanks to sustain their animals, said the Palestinian Authority (PA) agricultural ministry.

About 150,000 Palestinians and 300,000 Israeli settlers - out of the West Bank's 2.5 million people - live in Area C, according to UN estimates, while a total of 500,000 settlers live in occupied Palestinian land in the West Bank.

"My cistern was bulldozed by Israeli authorities without warning in December," said goat herder Saleem Hadaleen, 32, from Khashem ad-Daraj in south Hebron. About 1,200 people live in his herding community.

"The Israelis claim they tacked a demolition order to the cistern, but I did not receive it," he said, "and now the animals have to walk twice as far to reach a water source."

Saleem and his flock have been forced to return home, struggling to support his family of eight.

Saleem and many community members say their proximity to the construction of the "barrier" to the southeast and the expansion of the Israeli settlement Karmel to the northwest account for the demolitions which are forcing them to relocate.

Livelihood structures demolished

Two hundred and ninety-four livelihood and services structures in the West Bank were demolished by Israeli authorities in 2010, including 240 in Area C and 54 in Jerusalem, said OCHA.

UN Humanitarian Coordinator for oPt Max Gaylord told IRIN some 3,000 outstanding demolition orders remain for various residential and livelihood structures across the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

"Israel is trying to prevent economic and infrastructure development in these areas to reduce the Palestinian presence on the land"

"There is a clear increase in the demolition of livelihood structures in 2010 and 2011. This is happening mostly in the Jordan Valley, Area C, and in areas adjacent to settlements and the 'barrier' and in occupied East Jerusalem," said Ghassan Al-Khatib, an official from PA prime minister Salam Fayyad's office in Ramallah.

"Israel is trying to prevent economic and infrastructure development in these areas to reduce the Palestinian presence on the land to allow for further settlement expansion, and construction of the barrier," said Al-Khatib.

Maj Guy Inbar, the Coordinator for [Israeli] Government Activities in the Territories, told IRIN: "In 2010, 172 warrants for the dismantling of structures [including houses] belonging to Palestinians were issued in Area C, an almost identical figure to the number of structures belonging to Israelis that were dismantled in the same time period."

Another 150 such structures were removed from firing (closed military) zones, said Inbar.

"The legal standing of the firing zones is exactly the same for both Israelis and Palestinians," he said.

Areas A, B and C

