

Palestinian village faces demolition by Israel

By KARIN LAUB, Associated Press – 14 hours ago

SUSIYA, West Bank (AP) — Palestinians in this hamlet have clung to their arid acres for decades, living without proper electricity or water while Israel provides both to Jewish settlers on nearby hills. But the end now seems near for Susiya: Demolition orders distributed last week by the Israelis aim to destroy virtually the entire village.

Before it does, Israel could encounter an international complication: Several European countries, with traditional Israel ally Germany in the lead, have funded solar panels, wind turbines and wells to make life in area villages more bearable. A diplomatic incident may loom.

"They are turning us into refugees on our own land," said resident Mohammed Nawaja, principal of a 35-student elementary school that consists of four tents slated for removal.

Susiya is one of more than a dozen "unrecognized" Palestinian herding communities in the southern West Bank, a desert-like area close to the Green Line, Israel's pre-1967 war frontier with the West Bank, when it was ruled by Jordan. Its 160-odd residents live in shacks, caves and tents with cement-reinforced walls.

Israeli authorities say the structures are unlicensed. Residents and their supporters say Israel refuses to grant permits as part of a plan to clear the area for future territorial claims — a charge Israel denies.

Activists say Israeli authorities have issued demolition orders in most of the hamlets over the years, but Susiya faces the most immediate risk of wholesale razing.

At the heart of the matter is the struggle over the 62 percent of the West Bank that remains under full Israeli control — known as Area C. This area is home to more than 300,000 Jewish settlers, more than double the number of Palestinians living there. More than 90 percent of the West Bank's Palestinians live in the parts of territory adding up to 38 percent of the land, administered by the Palestinian Authority.

The division results from the 1990s autonomy agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. They were meant to be temporary and lead to a final deal on drawing the borders of a Palestinian state more than a decade ago. Negotiations repeatedly broke down, while the patchwork of jurisdictions in the West Bank remained.

Critics say Israel has blocked virtually all Palestinian development in Area C, while expanding the Jewish settlements there. Only 5 percent of Palestinian requests for building permits in Area C have been granted in recent years, said Alon Cohen-Lifshitz of the Israeli group Bimkom, which calls for fair planning practices.

Planning restrictions and demolition orders are part of a wider Israeli land grab, said Michael Sfard, an attorney for Israeli activists who have installed solar panels and wind turbines with German funding in 18 small communities in the southern West Bank.

"The federal government and its EU partners are watching the situation ... very carefully," said a German Foreign Ministry spokesman Wednesday, on customary condition of anonymity. "They are calling for safeguarding the German and international projects ... and are in close contact with the Israeli authorities."

Israel's Civil Administration, the branch of the military dealing with Palestinians in Area C, said it is working on more than a dozen master plans in the southern West Bank to regularize what it considers Palestinian squatters.

Maj. Guy Inbar, an Israeli spokesman, said some of the work is being held up because Palestinians are not cooperating. He said some of the Palestinians in the southern West Bank would be asked to move as part of such plans, but he declined to give details.

Qamar Assad, an attorney for Susiya, said the villagers have not been offered an alternate site.

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev said Israel is ready to tackle the core issue of drawing the borders of a Palestinian state, which would also resolve the problems of Susiya and the entire settlement issue.

The Palestinians, who want a state in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem — territories Israel captured in the 1967 war — refuse to resume talks until Israel freezes settlement construction on occupied lands.

Susiya's defenders say it's more vulnerable to displacement than some of the other villages in the area. The village is flanked by a Jewish settlement and the ruins of a centuries-old Jewish town of the same name.

Susiya residents lived in the area of the ruins until it was declared an archaeological site and they were forced to leave in the mid-1980s. Some left for other Palestinian communities, while others settled a few hundred yards away, on land Nawaja says is privately owned by him and his relatives.

Since Israel did not recognize the community, it was not hooked up to electricity or water grids, while the settlement of Susiya and several unauthorized Jewish outposts in the area receive such services, said Sfard.

In 2010, Israel's government designated the Susiya excavation area as a Jewish heritage site and promised funding to turn it into a major tourist attraction. Susiya residents say they've been barred from visiting the site, even though some were born there.

Among the finds are the remains of a synagogue with elaborate floor mosaics, and explanations offered to visitors include many links between the apparent practices of town residents and those described in Jewish scriptures.

Israeli archaeologist Yonathan Mizrahi, who was not involved in the dig, said excavations also yielded remnants of a mosque built atop the synagogue in later years, but that this is not mentioned to visitors. "There is a clear political agenda, to legitimize the settlement (of Susiya) as continuing the Jewish presence of the past," he said.

Last week, Civil Administration inspectors distributed demolition orders for several dozen structures in the village, including the school, a makeshift clinic, residential tents, animal shelters and German-funded solar panels, Assad said.

Some of the orders were initially issued in the 1990s but not implemented, while others are new.

Inbar said Israel is in touch with German officials, and one proposal is to take the solar panels to another area if Susiya residents agree to move there. The German Foreign Ministry official did not address the issue publicly.

The Israeli group that installed the panels, Comet-ME, said demolition orders or their precursors, stop-work orders, have been issued against nine of their 18 sites, including Susiya. The group is providing electricity to 1,300 Palestinians in the area.

Comet-ME said it had hoped to set up six more installations this year but will have to stop work until the legal problems are solved.

Associated Press writer David Rising contributed to this report from Berlin.

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