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UN officials call on Israel to abandon plans to demolish and transfer Khan al Ahmar – Abu al Helu community

Today, the Humanitarian Coordinator, Mr. Jamie McGoldrick, and the UNRWA Director of Operations in the West Bank, Mr. Scott Anderson, join others in the international community in calling on the Government of Israel to cease its plans to carry out the mass demolition and transfer of the Palestinian Bedouin community of Khan al Ahmar – Abu al Helu, located on the outskirts of East Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank. This follows the Israeli High Court of Justice's 24 May rejection of the community's petition to prevent the demolitions, marking an end to years-long legal efforts and leaving virtually no legal options to protect the community.

"Like many Palestinians in Area C, the residents of Khan al Ahmar – Abu al Helu have fought for years to live with dignity, to protect their children, their homes, and their community," said Mr. McGoldrick. "They have struggled in the face of tremendous daily pressure and are asking for the continued support of the international community to prevent the demolition of their homes."

Nearly all of Khan al Ahmar – Abu al Helu's structures are now at immediate risk of demolition by the Israeli authorities, including the school, initially built with donor support. The school serves some 170 students from the community and four surrounding ones. The proposed transfer seeks to move the rural livestock-dependent community to an urban site unsuitable for Bedouin livelihood, culture and traditions and is likely to increase their level of humanitarian need.

"After nine years of legal battle, this refugee community now faces the demolition of their homes, the loss of traditional livelihoods and the imminent risk of forcible transfer should the demolitions be conducted and the community be compelled to relocate, which would be a grave breach of the Geneva Convention," said Mr. Anderson. "Many already displaced from the Negev as a result of the 1948 conflict; they now face being displaced for a second time. As we have seen in similar circumstances in the past, the transfer of rural Bedouin to the urban setting of Jabal West, proposed by the Israeli state, will likely prove socially and economically devastating," he concluded.

Khan al Ahmar – Abu al Helu is one of 18 communities located in or next to an area slated in part for the E1 settlement plan, aimed at creating a continuous built-up area between the Ma'ale Adummim settlement and East Jerusalem. This week, the Israeli

authorities approved a planning scheme providing for the construction of 92 new housing units and an educational institution in the Kfar Adummim settlement, immediately adjacent to Khan al Ahmar; this settlement has also petitioned the High Court for the implementation of the outstanding demolition orders against the community.

“Israel’s obligations as an occupying power to protect the residents of Khan al Ahmar are clear,” said Mr. McGoldrick. “Should the Israeli authorities choose to implement the outstanding demolition orders in the community and force the people to leave, they would not only generate significant humanitarian hardship but also commit one of the grave breaches of international humanitarian law,” he concluded.

Background

Khan al Ahmar – Abu al Helu is home to 181 people, 53 per cent of whom are children and 95 per cent of whom are Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA. The community is one of dozens of herding communities in Area C of the West Bank that the UN views as being at risk of forcible transfer due to a coercive environment generated by Israeli practices and policies, including plans to move the communities from their current locations.

Though the residents of Khan al Ahmar – Abu al Helu have been present in the area since their displacement from southern Israel in the 1950s, the Israeli authorities are insisting that the community move to a designated relocation site, known as “Jabal West”. For years, the residents have insisted on their right to return to their original lands in southern Israel and, until this occurs, asked for international support to stay in their current location.

International humanitarian law (IHL) requires an occupying power to protect the population of the territory that it occupies, ensure its welfare and wellbeing, as well as the respect for its human rights. Any destruction of property by the occupying power is prohibited, except when rendered absolutely necessary by military operations, which is not relevant in the West Bank where there are currently no active hostilities. The extensive demolition of property is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and may amount to a war crime. Other than for the security of the population or imperative military reasons, IHL further prohibits the transfer of the population of an occupied territory without the genuinely and fully informed consent of the affected people, regardless of the motive. Consent is not considered genuine in an environment marked by the use or threat of physical force, coercion, fear of violence or duress. In the absence of such consent, the transfer is forcible and constitutes a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention.