NEWS RELEASE

UN Human Rights in Occupied Palestinian Territory
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Israel's settlement expansion is alarming and flies in face of international law - UN Human Rights Office

The UN Human Rights Office is alarmed by Israel's recent and ongoing settlement expansion and legal changes in the occupied West Bank; measures which fly in the face of international law, including a landmark ruling by the International Court of Justice in July.

On 14 August, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich announced a military order to allocate 148 acres of land for the new settlement of "Nahal Heletz", due to be constructed west of Bethlehem, encroaching on the Palestinian Battir UNESCO World Heritage Site. This follows a cabinet decision on 27 June to establish five new settlements, including "Nahal Heletz", by using Israeli law to "legalize" outposts which were already present on these sites - all of which remain unlawful under international law. Settlements, settler violence and the presence of settlers are the root causes of the majority of human rights violations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

Settlement expansion in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is being accompanied and greatly facilitated by the recent transfer of powers from the military to civilian officials. On 29 May, the Israeli authorities transferred administrative powers relating to land and settlements from military to Israeli civilian control, further integrating the administration of the West Bank into that of Israel, while not extending equal protection of the law to Palestinians.

The UN Human Right Office has raised concerns in the past that the transfer of wide administrative powers, relating to settlements and land administration, from the military authorities to a civilian administration within the Ministry of Defense could facilitate the annexation of the West Bank in violation of international law, including the United Nations Charter.

In its Advisory Opinion of 19 July, the ICJ held that Israel's policies and practices amount to annexation of large parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. It called for the evacuation of all settlers from the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

These legal and other structural changes give effect to the Government's policy of "application of sovereignty" and erase the separate administration of the occupied territory, thus cementing the annexation of large parts of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

The continued settlement activity and changes to the legal regime applicable in the occupied West Bank, along with the separation of Palestinians and Israeli settlers in the West Bank, also further institutionalize long-standing systematic discrimination, oppression and violence against the Palestinian people.

In the case of "Nahal Heletz", the building of a new settlement in this strategic area severely compromises the livelihoods, safety and movement of Palestinians living in five surrounding villages, while posing a significant threat to the contiguity and viability of a Palestinian state. Minister Smotrich has made clear that this was precisely the intention, praising the new settlement as a part of his mission to "fight the dangerous idea of a Palestinian state, and establish facts on the ground". The building of new settlements contributes to the obstruction of the exercise of the right to self-determination by the Palestinian people.

In addition, three other outposts have been retroactively "legalized" as "neighbourhoods" of existing settlements. Meanwhile, taking advantage of the permissive environment, settlers have established 25 new outposts since 7 October.

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