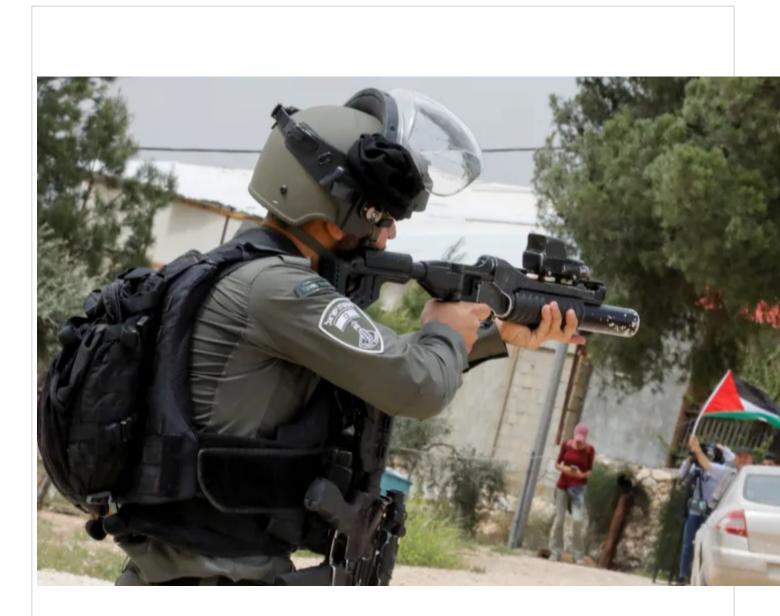# UN secretary-general tells Israel to halt illegal settlements in Palestine

An Israeli border police officer aims his weapon at Palestinian demonstrators protesting against Israeli settlements near Nablus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, April 10, 2023. REUTERS/Raneen Sawafta

United Nations, June 20 (RHC)-- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called on Israel to immediately "cease all settlement activities" in occupied Palestinian territory, describing Israel's plans to advance the building of Israeli settlements as driving "tensions and violence" and being a major obstacle to a lasting peace.

The UN chief's comments come after five Palestinians were killed – including a 15-year-old boy – and more than 90 were wounded in the fiercest clashes in years which erupted when Israeli forces raided the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank on Monday.

In the first such instance in almost 20 years, Israel sent helicopter gunships which fired rockets at targets in Jenin camp while Palestinian fighters fought for hours with small arms and explosive devices that disabled several Israeli military vehicles, trapping troops inside. Eight Israeli soldiers were wounded in the clashes that last nearly 10 hours, according to witnesses.

"The Secretary-General reiterates that settlements are a flagrant violation of international law," Farhan Haq, deputy spokesperson for the secretary general, said in a statement on Monday.

"The expansion of these illegal settlements is a significant driver of tensions and violence and deepens humanitarian needs," Haq said. "It further entrenches Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, encroaches on Palestinian land and natural resources, hampers the free movement of the Palestinian population, and undermines the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and sovereignty," the UN chief said, according to Haq.

Haq said that Guterres was "deeply troubled" by Israel's decision to amend settlement planning procedures that would speed up plans for new settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as the advancement of more than 4,000 settlement housing units by Israel's planning authorities.

On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approved plans for thousands of new housing units in the occupied West Bank, giving the far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich sweeping powers to expedite the construction of settlements, which are illegal under international law.

The plans for the approval of 4,560 housing units in various areas of the West Bank have been included on the agenda of Israel's Supreme Planning Council which meets next week. Israel's settlement expansion appears to put Netanyahu on a collision course with his closest ally, the United States, which said it was "deeply troubled" by the settlement expansion plan and the reports of changes to the processes for planning and approval of settlements on occupied Palestinian land.

Palestinian groups have also expressed deep concerns that the entire West Bank could soon come under Israeli control. To approve settlement activity is a "dangerous escalation to complete the annexation of the West Bank", the Palestinian foreign ministry said.

Khaled Elgindy, senior fellow at the Washington DC-based Middle East Institute, told Al Jazeera that the UN chief's strong words now need to be backed up with action on the ground. "The actions of this Israeli government, they've accelerated virtually every negative trend that you can imagine from the violence on the ground, to settlement expansion, to evictions, to building and expanding settlements," Elgindy said.

"Unless the very strong words are combined with some sort of action by key players, like the United States or the European Union, some sort of consequence to these actions, then they are simply going to be ignored as they always have been," he said. "So there really needs to be action on the ground to back up these strong words, and we just haven't seen that at all," he added.

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