

Palestinians fear revenge attacks after settler outposts removal

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Israeli Border police evacuate Israelis and their tent during a gathering of the Israeli settlement movement making a bid to set a new settlement close to Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement in Hebron in the Israeli-occupied West Bank

Ramallah, July 21 (RHC)-- Thousands of Israeli settlers have attempted to set up new illegal settlement outposts in six locations across the occupied West Bank. Groups of Jewish youth and families arrived at the earmarked locations in buses, on foot and in vehicles throughout Wednesday, bearing Israeli flags and camping tents under the protection of the Israeli army and police.

They gathered in locations near the occupied West Bank cities of Ramallah, Salfit and Hebron. The settlers were allowed to spend the night at the locations but Israeli forces forced the majority of the encampments out by Thursday, according to Israeli media reports.

Israeli forces blocked roads and set up checkpoints for Palestinians across entrances to towns and villages. In Salfit, settlers assembled in several areas near the village of Bruqin. Local sources told Al Jazeera that several hundred settlers were still there on Thursday morning but were later removed.

Murad Samara, a Bruqin municipality employee and Palestinian Medical Relief Society volunteer, said more than 1,000 settlers arrived on Wednesday. "I counted 20 tents. Even until sunset people were still arriving on foot, by vehicles," Samara told Al Jazeera. "There was a heavy presence for the border police and army, who set up checkpoints at the entrances to Bruqin."

He said that Israeli forces evacuated the majority of settlers on Thursday night, using force, in an operation that began at 11pm (20:00 GMT), with about 200 settlers remaining the next day.

The event was organized by the Nachala settler movement, which says that its goal is "to establish new communities in Judea and Samaria," using the Hebrew name for the occupied West Bank.

Last month, the movement announced plans to set up 10 outposts in the West Bank by July. Organisers said the settlers hope to "put down roots in 10 outposts" and go on location tours intended for "familiarising themselves with the area, while also learning the ideological and strategical significance of their initiative," according to Israeli media.

"The people who take part are not just learning the love of the land of Israel through walking through it but are also learning of the different possibilities of establishing new settlements," Nachala chairman Daniella Weiss said.

According to Israeli media, the group had been fundraising for months to execute the plan. Settler groups also gathered on Wednesday between the villages of Kobar and Deir Nitham, west of Ramallah, as well as near the village of Beit Einun and the settlement of Kiryat Arba in Hebron.

Israeli settlements are fortified Jewish-only housing complexes built on Palestinian land in violation of international law.

Between 600,000 and 750,000 Israeli settlers live in at least 250 illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem. The majority were built by the Israeli government, while many outposts were retroactively legalised under Israeli law as settlements.

Earlier this month, the World Zionist Organization's (WZO) Settlement Division, which falls under the direct control of the Israeli government, announced plans to spend \$8.5 million to develop dozens of outposts in a push to legalise them.

Samara said it is evident that the day-long event signals a new, dangerous precedent. He noted that on Thursday morning, two settlers, one armed with an M-16, were driving around inside the Palestinian village of Bruqin between the homes.

"In my entire life, I've never seen a young settler who is armed, inside Bruqin. Two youngsters, with guns inside the town, with all the arrogance, in a vehicle, driving between the homes during the day," he said. "In the past they would attack on shared roads, near the settlement, or attack specific homes at night." "They have no fear. This is new."

Samara also noted that the settler event was disruptive to the entire Salfit area, which serves as an artery for other parts of the northern West Bank. "There was a lot of traffic, and a lot of fear, but thankfully there were no attacks," he said.

He said that since the settlers were removed by force on Wednesday night, locals expect acts of revenge against Palestinians in the area. "It is expected that we will be the victims of the incitement that is going on, that they were removed by force. The settlers are very likely to carry out attacks – tonight may be heated," Samara said.

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