

West Bank farms fall to Israeli bulldozers



Palestinian farmer Mahmoud al-Adam holds an uprooted almond tree on terraces at Beit Ula that were destroyed by the Israeli Civil Administration.

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THE farmers of Beit Ula spent two years preparing their new groves of fruit, nut and olive trees, clearing rocks, building stone terraces and digging deep cisterns to catch the scarce rain.

The Israeli army destroyed it all in less than a day.

"We heard they were here at 6.30 in the morning, when it was still dark," said Sami al-Adam, one of eight farmers whose terraces were bulldozed on January 15.

"There must have been dozens of soldiers with jeep and bulldozers, and they brought a lot of Filipino workers, or maybe they were Thai, who pulled up the trees and cut them and buried them so we wouldn't be able to plant them again."

When the soldiers and police left the site, in the low hills on the West Bank's border with Israel, 6.4 hectares of trees and terraces had been uprooted and bulldozed. The concrete cisterns were broken open and choked with rubble. Two years' work and an investment of more than 100,000 euros (\$160,000) had gone to waste.

The Israeli military department that controls the occupied West Bank, confusingly called "the Civil Administration", said it demolished the terraces because they were built illegally on state land belonging to Israel.

This came as a surprise to the West Bank farmers, who brandish documents with Palestinian, Israeli and even Turkish stamps that, they say, prove their title to the land. It came as an even bigger surprise to the European Union, which provided 64,000 euros to the project as part of a program to improve "food security" for Palestinians.

European Commission spokeswoman Alex de Mauny said: "Obviously it's a disaster in human terms — these are not rich people, they are living very much on the margins — but there's the broader issue of why it happened, and how we can stop it from happening again."

A statement from the Civil Administration maintained, contrary to the EU's statement, that the Europeans had not funded the project.

According to a 2002 report by Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, 40% of the West Bank has been seized by Israeli military tribunals, which declare it to be "state land", re-allocating much of it to Jewish settlements.

In the case of Beit Ula, the Civil Administration says the farmers were officially informed that they were building

illegally on state land in 2006 and given the statutory 45 days to appeal before the demolition notice became final.

One of the farmers, Mahmoud al-Adam, shows visitors a military form that he found under a stone on his plot in June 2006, telling him he would be evicted from 2.5 hectares of state land that he was illegally building on, and that he would be charged the demolition cost.

Such forms are the Israeli army's standard notification for house demolitions or land seizures. But there was apparently no warning to the other seven farmers, and 6.4 hectares of terrace and trees were destroyed, not 2.5 hectares.

The Civil Administration has yet to respond to the claim that most of the farmers received no legal warning or due process.

A spokesman said: "It's a routine action. It's nothing special. We do these activities every day in Judea and Samaria," using the biblical Jewish terms for the West Bank.

"We are very strict about these things. If you let one person do it unauthorised, all the others will come after him."

According to Civil Administration figures, in the seven years to September 2007 nearly 5000 demolition orders were issued against unauthorised Palestinian houses, buildings or infrastructure in Area C, the 60% of the West Bank that officially remains under full Israeli rule. Of these, 1663 were executed, or roughly a third.

In the same period, 2900 demolition orders were issued against illegal building by Jewish settlers in the area. Only 7%, or 199, were carried out.

And while the Civil Administration issued permits for 18,472 housing units for Jews in those seven years, the indigenous Palestinians were granted only 91 building permits. According to figures from the Israeli group Peace Now, 94% of the Palestinian applications were rejected, including requests to build or extend houses as well as repair roads, water pipes, wells and other infrastructure.

"The numbers speak for themselves," said Hagit Ofran, a settlement monitor with Peace Now. "Settler lands are being supported by government funds and planners and so on, but often the settlers also build without permits and on state land, and when they do, nothing happens to them ... But law enforcement against the Palestinians is very efficient."

The Civil Administration accuses Peace Now of distorting the truth and said the reason so few permits were granted to the 70,000 Palestinians in Area C, and so many demolitions were carried out, was that most did not apply for permits until their projects had already been condemned by military inspectors and their applications must therefore be refused.

"We assume that if they came and asked, we'd give them thousands of permits," a spokesman said.

This week also brought news of the establishment of two more Jewish settlements in the West Bank — one in the Jordan Valley and another a "new neighbourhood" of Eli, an older Jewish settlement near Nablus.

These are illegal under Israeli law and breach Israel's own loose interpretation of its promise to freeze settlements under the 2003 Road Map, and last year's Annapolis process. Yet the new settlements are guarded by the Israel Defence Forces and have already been hooked up to state water, power and road networks.

The Civil Administration told journalists any attempt to evict the settlers or demolish their structures would depend on the political leadership and on Israel's High Court.

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