

UN expert calls Israeli settlements a war crime

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FILE PHOTO: A view shows the Jewish settlement of Maale Adumim in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, on June 30, 2020. © Reuters / Ammar Awad

United Nations, July 10 (RHC)-- A top UN rights expert has called for Israeli settlements to be classified as war crimes, urging the international community to demand accountability for a practice it has long deemed illegal.

Presenting his latest report to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Michael Lynk, the United Nations special rapporteur on the rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, said the settlements constitute a “violation of the absolute prohibition against settler implantation”.

“In my report, I conclude that the Israeli settlements do amount to a war crime,” the UN expert said. He said the settlements violate an absolute ban on an occupying power transferring part of its civilian population into occupied territory, thereby meeting the definition of a war crime under the Rome Statute founding the International Criminal Court (ICC).

“I submit to you that this finding compels the international community ... to make it clear to Israel that its illegal occupation, and its defiance of international law and international opinion, can and will no longer be cost-free,” Lynk told the Geneva rights forum.

Responding to Lynk’s report, former member of the Palestinian Liberation Organization executive committee Hanan Ashrawi posted on Twitter: “Calling things by their name!” “UN Human Rights Council Rapporteur on Palestine, Michael Lynk, clearly seeks int’l accountability for #IsraeliCrimes,” she wrote.

Many countries consider the settlements a breach of international law. Israel disputes this and cites biblical and historical connections to the land, as well as security needs. Israel’s mission to the UN in Geneva, in a statement to Reuters news agency, rejected Lynk’s report as “the latest one-sided and biased report against Israel”.

The mission accused Lynk of turning a blind eye to violations committed by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, the Palestinian group that governs the besieged Gaza Strip.

Lynk said Israel’s demolition of Bedouin tent dwellings in a village in the West Bank on Wednesday left residents without food or water in the heat of the Jordan Valley, calling it “both unlawful and heartless.”

“Progressive seizure of Palestinian lands together with the protection of the settlements is a further consolidation of Israel’s de facto annexation of the West Bank,” he said. There are nearly 300 settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, with more than 680,000 Israeli settlers, Lynk said.

The United States, Israel’s closest ally which has observer status at the council, did not speak at the council which it accuses of having an anti-Israel bias.

Lotte Knudsen, the European Union’s ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, said the settlements were illegal under international law. “Such actions as forced transfers, evictions, demolitions, and confiscation of homes will only escalate an already tense environment.”

The settlements have become “the engine of Israel’s 54-year-old occupation, the longest in the modern world”, Lynk added. International action, not just words, was needed to resolve the situation, he said.

“As long as the international community criticises Israel without seeking consequences and accountability, it is magical thinking to believe that the 54-year-old occupation will end and the Palestinians will finally realise their right to self-determination.”

Palestinians want to establish an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital, but the issue of Jewish settlements on land captured by Israel in a 1967 war has long been a stumbling block in the peace process. The last round of peace talks collapsed in 2014.

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