

*Israeli forces demolish
Palestinian school in southern
occupied West Bank*



Young Palestinian boys sits in what used to be his grade school classroom

Ramallah, November 24 (RHC)-- Israeli forces have demolished a recently-built Palestinian primary school in the Masafer Yatta region of the southern occupied West Bank, where residents are facing the ongoing threat of forced displacement.

Locals and officials told Al Jazeera that the Israeli army had raided the area on Wednesday morning and demolished the school, located in the village of Isfey al-Fauqa.

“The Israeli occupation forces demolished a school while it was in session and students were inside,” the head of Masafer Yatta’s local council, Nidal Younis, told Al Jazeera. “They used sound bombs to scare the children and get them out of the school,” he added.

The Israeli High Court of Justice revoked on Wednesday an interim injunction freezing a demolition order against the school, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council. The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories – COGAT, the Israeli military body responsible for administrative affairs in the occupied West Bank – said it demolished a building built illegally in an area designated as a closed firing zone.

The institution was built about a month ago and had been operating for less than two weeks. It served 22 students from four different villages in Masafer Yatta, up to the fifth grade.

It is one of more than a dozen schools built across the occupied West Bank under a programme by the Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of Education with funding from the European Union, Fadi al-Umour, an activist from Masafer Yatta, told Al Jazeera.

All the schools built as part of this project are located in Area C – the 60 percent of the occupied West Bank under full Israeli military control – and are intended to challenge Israeli restrictions on Palestinian development there. The European Union Delegation to the Palestinians said that it was “appalled by the news” of the demolition.

The Palestinian Ministry of Education condemned the demolition in a statement on Wednesday morning and described it as a “heinous crime.” “It is an addition to the series of ongoing crimes by the occupation against the educational sector, and its targeting of children, students, educational cadres, and institutions [is] without regard for international charters and laws,” the statement continued, adding that such practices are “a flagrant violation of students’ right to safe and free education”.

The ministry said it had organised, just a day prior to the demolition, a visit by a delegation of diplomats and United Nations officials to the Isfey al-Fauqa school.

The school demolition comes days after an 18-year-old Palestinian student was shot dead by Israeli forces while he was on his way to school just outside of the Jenin refugee camp in the northern Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Al-Umour, who is the coordinator of Masafer Yatta’s protection and resilience committee, explained that “the construction of the Isfey school had not yet been completed when it was demolished, but the school was already operating.”

He added that the army also confiscated furniture from the school, including the students’ chairs, and said the school serves the four villages of Tuba, Isfey al-Fauqa, Isfey al-Tahta, and Mughayyer al-Adeed. The nearest other school to the villages is about four kilometres away.

“This occupation targets everything – it targets our homes, education, our water, solar panels,” said Younis, the council head. “They think this will pressure people to leave so that they can displace them, so that they can ethnically cleanse Masafer Yatta.”

Masafer Yatta, which falls in Area C, is a region south of Hebron, where some eight villages, home to more than 1,200 Palestinians, including 500 children, are facing imminent forced displacement by Israeli authorities based on a May 2022 ruling by Israel’s High Court of Justice.

The ruling concluded a more than two-decade legal battle waged by the residents against their displacement. The Israeli army now has the green light to demolish their homes and force them out at any moment under the pretext that they live in an Israeli army “firing zone”.

Many families in this region lived there prior to Israel's occupation of the West Bank in 1967. They make their living as shepherds and farmers, but face a myriad of oppressive Israeli military policies including restrictions on maintaining and developing their homes, and barriers to accessing the electricity grid and water network.

They are also surrounded by a belt of illegal Israeli settlements and live under systematic Israeli police, army and settler violence. An international digital campaign has been launched by activists and action groups in Palestine and abroad, under the hashtag #SaveMasaferyatta, in the hope of drawing attention to the imminent risk facing the residents and pressuring Israel to cease its displacement efforts.

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