

United Nations says Israeli settlement expansion in occupied Palestinian territories amounts to war crime



Geneva, March 8 (RHC)-- Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories have expanded by a record amount and risk eliminating any practical possibility of a Palestinian state, the United Nations rights chief warns.

The growth of Israeli settlements amounts to the transfer by Israel of its own civilian population into occupied territories, which is a war crime, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said on Friday.

The international community has long viewed Israeli settlements as a violation of international law and a hindrance to Palestinian statehood. The United States said last month that the settlements were “inconsistent” with international law after Israel announced new housing plans in the occupied West Bank.

Turk’s report found that the Israeli government’s policies “appear aligned, to an unprecedented extent, with the goals of the Israeli settler movement to expand long-term control over the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and to steadily integrate this occupied territory into the State of Israel”.

“Settler violence and settlement-related violations have reached shocking new levels, and risk eliminating any practical possibility of establishing a viable Palestinian state,” Turk said in a statement that accompanied a 16-page report about the growth in illegal Israeli housing units.

The report, based on the UN’s own monitoring as well as other sources, documented 24,300 new Israeli housing units in the occupied West Bank during a one-year period through to the end of October, which it said was the highest since monitoring began in 2017.

It also said there had been a dramatic increase in the intensity, severity and regularity of both Israeli settler and state violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, particularly since Hamas’s October 7 attacks on southern Israel, which triggered the current war in the Gaza Strip.

Since then, more than 400 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces or by settlers, the report said. It additionally pointed to forced evictions, non-issuance of building permits, home demolitions and restrictions on movement imposed on Palestinians.

The United States, Britain and France have imposed sanctions on Israeli settlers for acts of violence and incitement against Palestinians living in the West Bank in recent weeks.

Israel’s settlement-planning authority on Wednesday greenlit permits for nearly 3,500 new housing units in occupied Palestinian territory, the first such approvals since Israel’s war on Gaza began last year. The approval sparked widespread condemnation from several countries, including Israel’s allies.

The Israeli plans to build settler homes in Maale Adumim, Efrat and Kedar flew “in the face of international law”, Turk said.

Jordan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the settlements were unilateral and illegal measures that violate international law while Qatar said such moves “pose a serious threat to international efforts aimed at implementing the two-state solution and hinder the resumption of the peace process”.

Germany asked Israel to withdraw the plans, which it called “a serious violation of international law”. “The enemies try to harm and weaken us, but we will continue to build and be built up in this land,” far-right Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said on X. Smotrich noted that the construction adds to the 18,515 housing units in illegal settlements approved in the past year.

The UN’s special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Tor Wennesland, said all settlements were “illegal under international law” and a “driver of conflict” in the West Bank.

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain – two Arab nations that normalised relations with Israel as part of the US-mediated Abraham Accords – also condemned Israel’s plans.

Israel started building settlements after capturing the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Six-Day War. It is illegal under international law for Israel to establish settlements in these Palestinian territories.



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