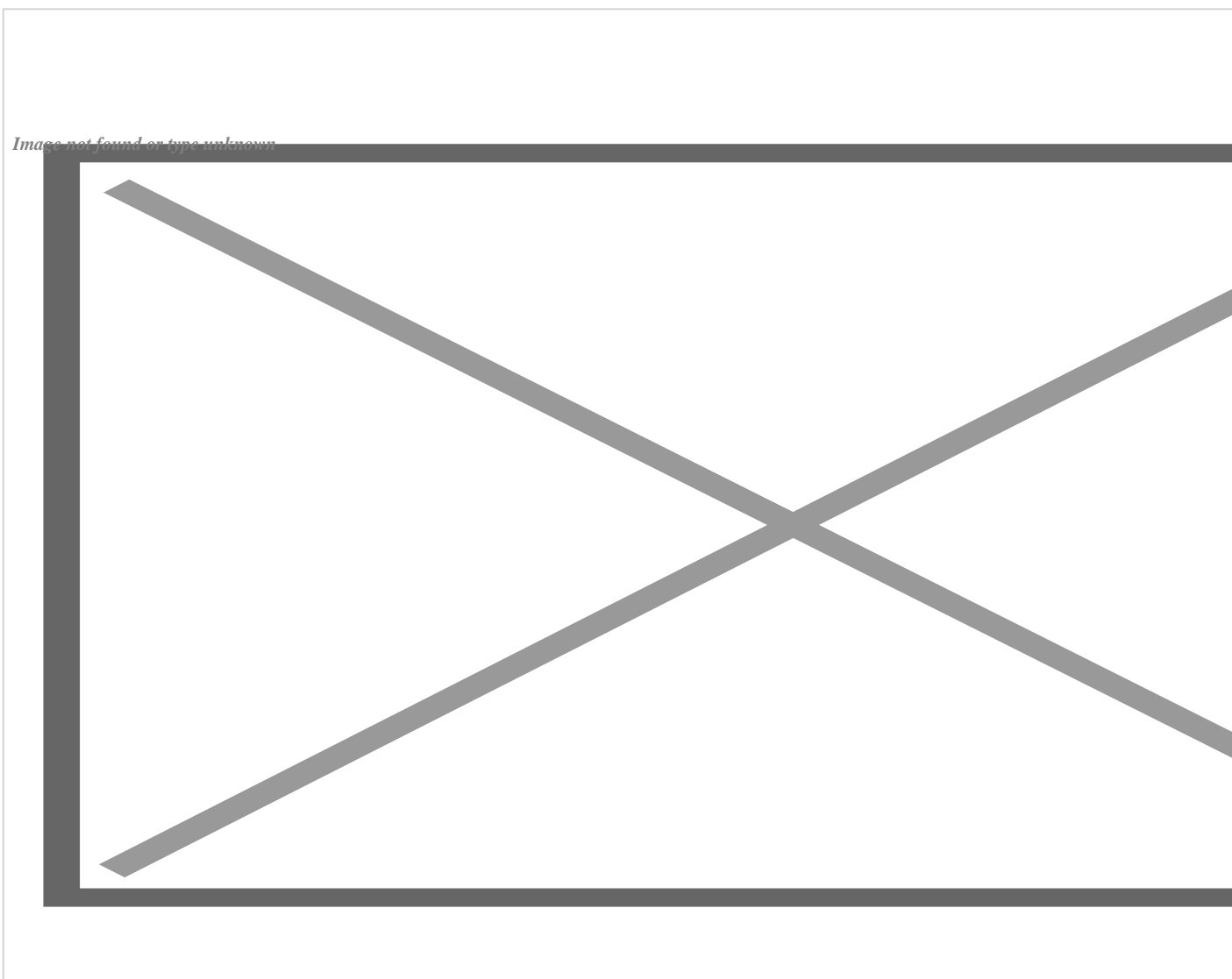


UN chief says Israeli settlements constitute violation of international law



United Nations, January 20 (RHC)-- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has condemned the Israeli regime's recent plan to construct hundreds of new settler units in the occupied West Bank, saying such structures are considered illegal under international law.

"The establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem al-Quds, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law," Guterres said in a statement issued at the United Nations in New York.

The UN head added: "Settlement expansion... further erodes the possibility of ending the occupation and establishing a contiguous and viable sovereign Palestinian State, based on the pre-1967 lines."

Antonio Guterres also said the Tel Aviv regime's latest decision to build approximately 800 units in the settlements of Beit El, Tal Menashe, Rehelim, Shavei Shomron, Barkan, Karnei Shomron and Givat Zeev, is "a major obstacle to the achievement of the (so-called) two-state solution, and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace" in the Middle East.

Separately, the Italian Foreign Ministry renewed Rome's deep concern about Israel's decision to start building some 800 new housing units in the West Bank. The ministry, in a statement released on Monday, called on the Israeli authorities to reconsider their decision.

The statement noted that Israel's settlements expansion activities in the West Bank violate international law, and threaten to undermine the viability of a just and sustainable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in line with internationally-recognized standards and relevant United Nations resolutions.

The ministry called on Israel to refrain from any unilateral action that undermines the ongoing efforts to restore the climate of confidence between the two parties and jeopardizes the resumption of direct negotiations with the Palestinians.

Furthermore, Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney expressed extreme disappointment at the announcement by Israeli authorities to build new settler units in the West Bank. "Settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territory is illegal under international law," he said in a press statement. "I continue to be very concerned about the tender for construction of a new settlement of over 1,200 housing units in Givat Hamatos," the top diplomat said.

The expansion of settlements in the strategically sensitive area between Jerusalem al-Quds and Bethlehem will undermine the viability and territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state and the possibility of a negotiated "two-state solution" in line with internationally-agreed parameters, the statement pointed out.

"I reiterate my call on Israel to reverse this decision and to halt all settlement activity. I urge all parties to respect international law and to avoid unilateral actions which erode trust and confidence - critical components to the resumption of meaningful negotiations - between the parties," it concluded.

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