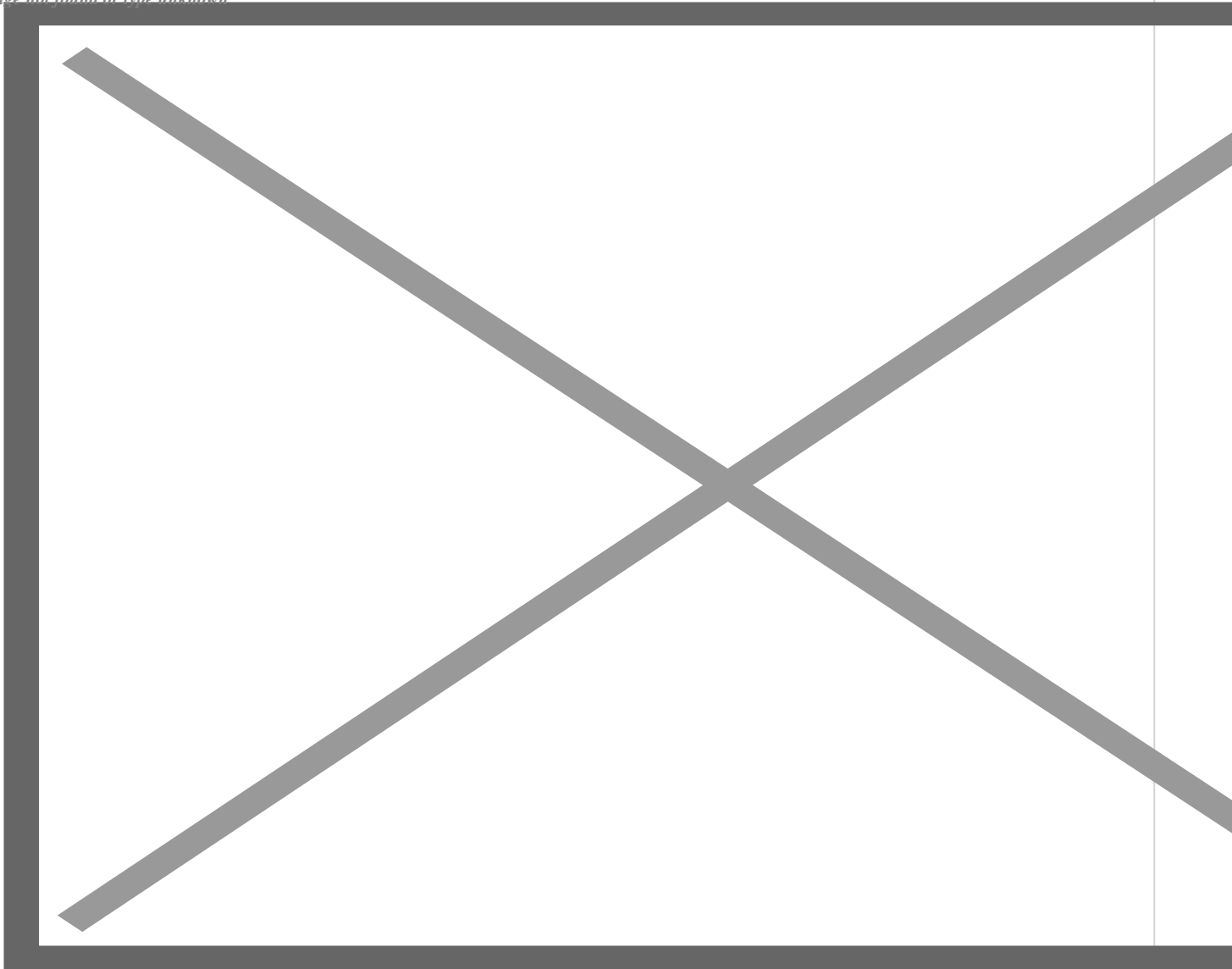


Palestinian community in West Bank demolished for seventh time

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A woman holds her child while leaving a tent as Israeli forces demolish the Bedouin village of Khirbet Humsah, near Tubas city in the Jordan Valley, in February [File: Emmanuel Dunand/AFP]

Ramallah, July 8 (RHC)-- Israeli forces demolished the Palestinian Bedouin community of Humsa al-Baqai'a in the Jordan Valley on Wednesday, including living and farming structures provided by the international community.

At least 65 people, including 35 children, were displaced, said Christopher Holt of the West Bank Protection Consortium, a group of international aid agencies supported by the European Union that is assisting the residents.

The demolitions left the villagers, who earn their livelihood primarily by herding some 4,000 sheep, homeless again. The EU in the past has helped residents rebuild after previous demolitions. Under the Oslo Accords, the Jordan Valley, which makes up 60 percent of the occupied West Bank, is classified as Area C – meaning it is under full Israeli military and civil control.

It was the seventh time the hamlet has been demolished since November 2020, when – according to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) – 83 structures were destroyed in the largest single demolition incident recorded in recent years.

Some of the makeshift homes and farm facilities were provided by the European Union. Humsa al-Baqai'a has received material assistance from the West Bank Protection Consortium, formed to prevent the forcible transfer of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

Holt said the families refused to leave the area. "We understand what happened this morning is that the Israeli military entered the community at around 9am and they demolished everything in the community, including eight residential structures, shelters for animals, as well as agricultural structures," he told Al Jazeera. "Israeli forces tried to forcibly transfer the families, which is illegal because this is occupied territory and the families have refused to leave... It's a very serious escalation."

An Israeli security official said the government has carried out months of discussions with residents and offered an alternative site nearby. The official, who was not authorised to speak publicly, told The Associated Press the offer for the new location stands.

Under international law, an occupying power is strictly prohibited from transferring members of the occupied population from their existing communities against their will.

Last February, Israeli forces also confiscated the hamlet's water tanks, after carrying out demolitions on two previous occasions during the same month, leaving the community with no drinking water or water for their livestock.

The families in Humsa al-Baqai'a currently have no shelter from the scorching 39-degree-Celsius (102-Fahrenheit) heat in the Jordan Valley. "The Israeli forces have yet again destroyed the lives of families in Humsa and are now forcing them out of their homes," said Caroline Ort, the Norwegian Refugee Council's Palestine country director.

"The international community must resolutely condemn this dispossession and show that it will not tolerate these brazen breaches of international law. The Israeli authorities must immediately grant humanitarian access to the community to meet their urgent needs."

Ort said the demolitions are the latest "in an unrelenting show of force by the Israeli authorities, who have destroyed at least 421 structures belonging to Palestinians in the first six months of 2021 alone." "This marks a 30 percent rise in demolitions for the same period in 2020," said Ort.

The village is one of 38 Bedouin areas partially or completely located within a field that Israel declared a military test-firing site. According to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the designated "firing zones" constitute nearly 30 percent of Area C where 6,200 Bedouin people live.

These communities are some of the most vulnerable in the occupied West Bank, with limited access to basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, education and health services.

Palestinian homes in the Jordan Valley are subjected to demolitions by Israeli authorities who claim they were built without permits. The area of the Palestinian Jordan Valley covers about 395,368 acres (160,000 hectares) with about 13,000 Israeli settlers living across 38 settlements. Meanwhile, about 65,000 Palestinians live in 34 communities.

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