

Israel forces Palestinians to tear down their own homes in Jerusalem

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The Shqeirat families were forced to demolish their own homes on Monday after an Israeli court decision a day earlier [Al Jazeera]

Jerusalem, January 31 (RHC)-- Israeli authorities have forced two Palestinian families in the occupied East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Jabal al-Mukabber to demolish their own homes, rendering 13 people,

including five children, homeless.

The Shqeirat family -- to whom the homes belong -- told Al Jazeera that the Israeli District Court in Jerusalem issued a final decision on Sunday ordering their homes to be demolished within a day's time.

Israeli authorities cited a lack of building permits as the reason, but the Israeli-controlled Jerusalem Municipality denies at least 93 percent of all Palestinian building permit requests in the city.

The two homeowners, brothers Mahmoud and Daoud Shqeirat, and their families began clearing out their homes east of the occupied Old City late on Sunday night ahead of the self-demolition, which began at 10 am (08:00 GMT) on Monday.

"The border police came to the homes immediately after the court decision on Sunday morning and told the families that if they don't self-demolish, they [police] would bring their machinery and carry out the demolition themselves and that the family would have to bear the cost," Arafat Shqeirat, one of their cousins and next-door neighbour, told Al Jazeera from Jabal al-Mukabber, also known as al-Sawahrah al-Gharbiya.

Like many other Palestinian families in Jerusalem, the Shqeirats opted to tear down their own homes rather than have the Jerusalem Municipality do it on their behalf in order to avoid the high cost of the demolition, which can go up to tens of thousands of shekels.

"The municipality inspector told me yesterday: 'You will even have to pay for the bottle of water that I give to the officer carrying out the demolition,'" 45-year-old Arafat continued. "We disassembled everything in the house last night – the windows, the doors, the kitchen. They told us they would come by today and check that we are going ahead with the demolition," he added.

The two homes were built in 2012 and measure 80 square metres each. Mahmoud, 38, is a father of four children, including an eight-month-old baby, while his brother, Daoud, is a father of five. The families first received the demolition orders three years ago but attempted to battle it in Israeli courts, to no avail. They have paid more than 50,000 shekels (\$15,680) in fines to the Jerusalem Municipality since they first built their homes for lacking a permit.

"We are now in the process of searching for homes for rent for the families – yesterday we put their belongings in one of their brother's homes," said Arafat, adding that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) would be providing them with a tent to stay in for a few days before they are able to find homes. "We're searching – the rents in Jerusalem are very high."

Israeli forces routinely carry out demolitions of Palestinian homes in occupied East Jerusalem under different legal pretexts, with one of the main ones being "building without a permit." At least one-third of all Palestinian homes in Jerusalem lack a building permit, placing some 100,000 Palestinians at risk of forced displacement.

As many as 218 more Palestinian households, home to 970 people including 424 children, are facing forced evictions due to ongoing legal cases filed against them by Israeli settler groups in coordination with the government. Some 350,000 Palestinians currently live in Jerusalem, with 220,000 illegal Israeli settlers living in their midst.

Forcible displacement and transfer of a militarily-occupied population is a violation of international law and a war crime. Last week, 15 Palestinians from the Karameh family were made homeless when Israeli forces demolished their home in the nearby neighbourhood of al-Tur. The demolition in al-Tur came days after authorities demolished an 18-member home in the flashpoint neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah during an overnight raid.

“Israel’s policy is known – they want to forcibly displace people and push them out of Jerusalem,” homeowner Mahmoud Shqeirat told reporters.

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