

Israeli officials deny agreeing to freeze in settlement construction in West Bank

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich arrive at a cabinet meeting at the prime minister's office. (Photo> AFP)

Tel Aviv, March 2 (RHC)-- The Israeli foreign minister and several other regime officials say Israeli settlements in the West Bank will continue to be built under the current right-wing administration after the Tel Aviv regime at a summit pledged to freeze any more outposts for six months.

"Definitely we will continue to build there as well," Israel's foreign minister, Eli Cohen, said on Tuesday during a joint news conference in Berlin with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.

The remarks come after a joint statement said Israel agreed at a summit in Jordan to 'stop discussion of any new settlement units' for four months. The meeting between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which took place on Sunday in the Red Sea city of Aqaba, was also attended by Egypt and the United States.

According to a joint communique released by the U.S. State Department on Sunday, Israel committed to "stop discussion of any new settlement units for four months and to stop authorization of any outposts for six months." Shortly after the communique was released, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted that there "will not be any freeze" to settlement construction.

Several Israeli officials say the regime will not halt the authorization or construction of settlement units. Tzachi Hanegbi, an adviser to Netanyahu, said the Israeli authorities would not roll back their decision to legalize nine West Bank outposts or build 9,500 additional housing units in the occupied West Bank.

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said on Twitter that he had "no clue what they talked or didn't talk about in Jordan," adding there would not be a freeze on settlements "even for one day."

Zaha Hassan, a human rights lawyer and fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told the Middle East Eye website that the meeting was another sign the U.S. was not willing to use its leverage to push Israel toward respecting international law. "Holding meetings in Aqaba or Sharm El Sheikh are great photo ops, but that is all they can be without U.S. power deployed to deescalate the situation."

"Telling Israel that aid and political cover will never be withdrawn or suspended is exactly the reason why Israeli officials feel emboldened to move ahead with annexation of the West Bank," she added. The move defies growing international opposition to construction in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Last month, the UN Security Council passed a statement strongly criticizing Israeli settlement construction on occupied Palestinian lands. The United States, Israel's closest ally, blocked what would have been an even tougher legally-binding resolution.

On Sunday, Israeli settlers, under the protection of Israeli forces, burned dozens of Palestinian homes and cars in the town of Huwwara, near the city of Nablus in the occupied West Bank.

Israeli settlers and troops have escalated attacks on Palestinians since late December 2022, when Netanyahu again became the regime's prime minister at the head of a cabinet of hard-right and extremist parties. At least 62 Palestinians have been killed by Israelis this year, at a rate of more than one fatality per day.

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