

Australia, Canada and UK express deep concern over Israeli settlements

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A billboard advertising housing projects hangs on a hill in the West Bank Jewish settlement of Ariel near the Palestinian town of Nablus [File: Ariel Schalit/AP Photo]?

Canberra, July 2 (RHC)-- The governments of Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom have said they are "deeply concerned" about recent events in the occupied West Bank, including Israel's decision to

expand its illegal settlements there amid rising violence, saying they “further reduce the prospects for peace.”

“The continued expansion of settlements is an obstacle to peace and negatively impacts efforts to achieve a negotiated two-state solution. We call on the Government of Israel to reverse these decisions,” the foreign ministers of the three countries said in a joint statement released on Saturday.

Israel’s defense ministry planning committee that oversees settlement construction approved more than 5,000 new settlement homes on June 26. Settlements are considered illegal under international law.

The foreign ministers’ statement also expressed concern about the changes to the settlement approval process approved on June 18, in which far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich was given sweeping powers to expedite their construction, bypassing measures that have been in place for 27 years.

The settlement expansion plans have occurred as violence in the region has intensified in recent weeks. On June 19, Israeli forces stormed the Jenin refugee camp, deploying the use of helicopter gunships in the occupied West Bank for the first time in 20 years. That raid killed seven Palestinians and injured 91 others.

Palestinian gunmen then targeted Israelis, while Israeli settlers carried out a string of attacks on Palestinian villages.

The Australian, Canadian and British governments condemned violence targeting both Israelis and Palestinians. They also welcomed the joint statement by Israeli security chiefs equating the Israeli settler attacks to “nationalist terrorism.”

Nearly 750,000 Israelis live in 250 illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, built on land captured by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.

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