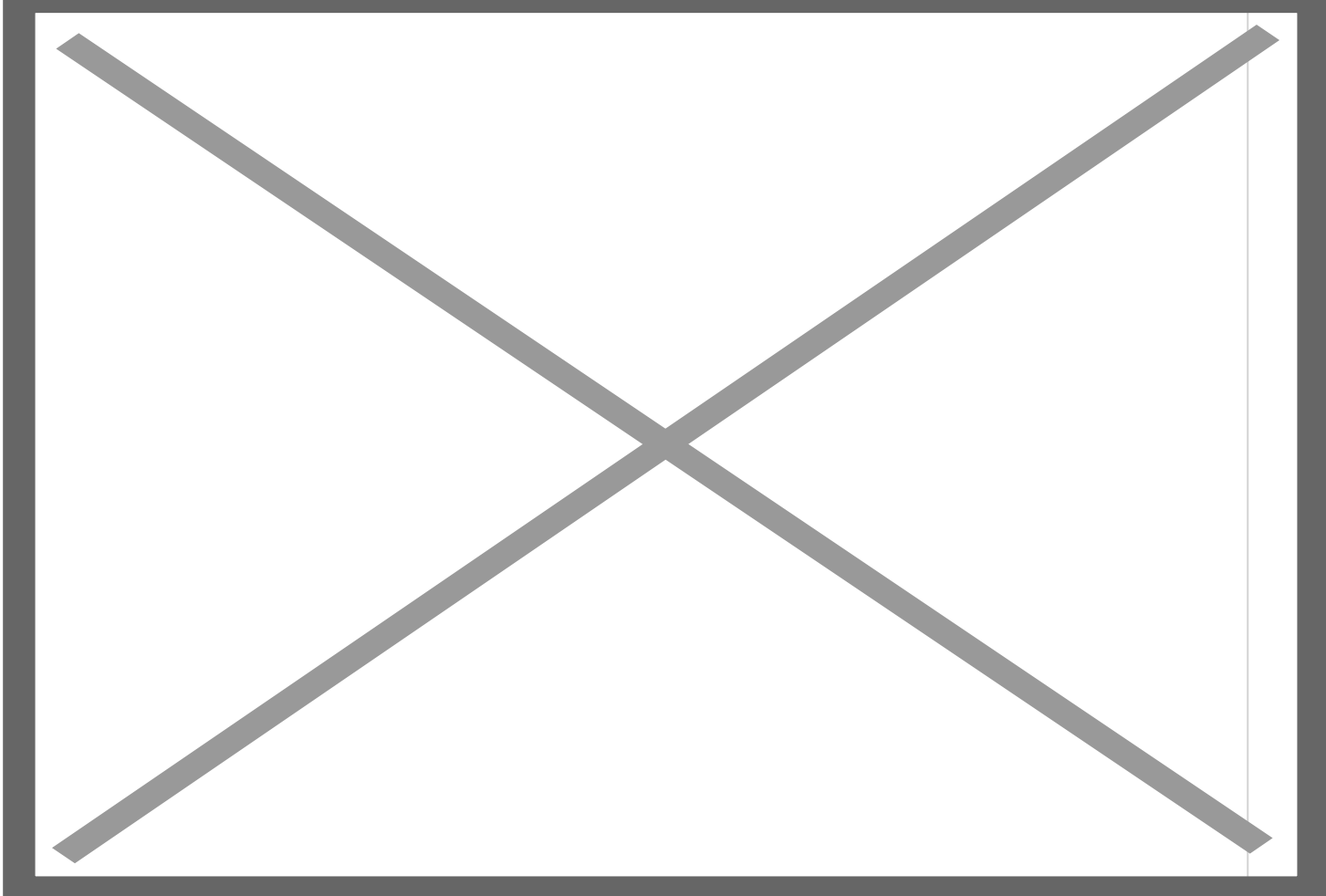


Israel seizes 800 hectares of Palestinian land in Occupied West Bank

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Tel Aviv, March 23 (RHC)-- Israel's Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has declared 800 hectares (1,977 acres) in the occupied West Bank as state land, in a move that will facilitate the use of the ground for settlement building.

The announcement on Friday came as United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Israel for talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Smotrich underlined the government's determination to press ahead with settlement building in the West Bank, despite growing international opposition.

"While there are those in Israel and in the world who seek to undermine our right to Judea and Samaria and the country in general, we promote settlement through hard work and in a strategic manner all over the country," Smotrich said, using Biblical names for the area of the West Bank that are commonly employed in Israel.

The denomination of the land in the Jordan Valley as state land follows a similar designation of 300 hectares (740 acres) in the Maale Adumim area of the West Bank, which the Palestinians want as the core of a future independent state.

The U.S. said last month that Israel's expansion of settlements in the West Bank was inconsistent with international law, signalling a return to longstanding US policy that had been reversed by the previous administration of Donald Trump.

The change brought the U.S. back into line with most of the world, which considers the settlements built on Palestinian territory Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war to be illegal. Israel itself disputes this view, citing the Jewish people's so-called historical and Biblical ties to the land.

Earlier this month, UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk said, "The establishment and continuing expansion of settlements amount to ... a war crime under international law." Palestinian authorities condemned the land seizure and expansion of settlements.

The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the latest move a "crime" that is part of an "official policy racing against time to annex the West Bank and eliminate the possibility of creating a Palestinian state".

"There are no morals, values, principles or international resolutions that can stop the extremist right," the ministry said in a statement. "The international failure to protect our people is complicity and cover for Israel's ongoing evasion of punishment," it added.

Smotrich, the influential leader of one of the hard-right pro-settler parties in Netanyahu's coalition, himself lives in a settlement and has consistently backed settlement building. Israeli settlement watchdog Peace Now said the announced seizure is the single largest since the 1993 Oslo Accords, and "2024 marks a peak in the extent of declarations of state land".

Peace Now called the timing of the announcement a "provocation" as it came during the visit by Blinken, who has been critical of settlement expansion by Netanyahu's government.

International pressure for a resumption of efforts to reach a two-state solution, with an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, has grown amid efforts to end the nearly six-month war in Gaza. Little progress has been made in achieving Palestinian statehood since the signing of the Oslo Accords. Among the obstacles impeding it are expanding Israeli settlements.

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