

‘If our home is
destroyed again where
are we supposed to go?’



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UNDER THREAT

THE WEST BANK VILLAGE OF ‘AQABA

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BACKGROUND

The Israeli authorities have not allowed Palestinians to build and develop their land in some 60 per cent of the occupied West Bank designated as "Area C" in the Oslo Accords of 1993-95 (which led to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority). In 1999 an Israeli army spokesperson told Amnesty International delegates: "Our policy is not to approve building in Area C". More than 94 per cent of building permit applications submitted by Palestinians in Area C from 2000 to September 2007 were rejected. Meanwhile, the Israeli authorities have continued to build and expand Israeli settlements on Palestinian land in these same areas, in violation of international law and in contempt of resolutions by the UN Security Council and other bodies. Since its occupation of the West Bank in 1967, Israel has established more than 150 settlements in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem). The establishment of these settlements violates the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and the Hague Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land.

HOMES DEMOLISHED — LIVES DESTROYED

The future of 'Aqaba, a small village in the north-east of the occupied West Bank, is in doubt. For years its inhabitants have feared losing their homes. Since the late 1990s the Israeli army has issued demolition orders for 35 of the 45 homes and other buildings in the village, including the kindergarten, clinic, women's centre and mosque. Even a small chunk of road received a demolition order when the village council paved it a few years ago.

The Israeli army considers the homes and virtually every other structure in the village "illegal" because they were built without permits – permits that are impossible to obtain as the army does not allow Palestinians to build on their land in 'Aqaba or in most other parts of the West Bank.

FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Since Israel's occupation of the West Bank, hundreds of residents have been forced to leave the village,

mostly young couples, because they were not allowed to build on their land.

Another threat has made life difficult for 'Aqaba's inhabitants. For years the Israeli army used the village as a training ground, apparently because its topography is similar to that in South Lebanon (occupied by Israel between 1982 and 2000). In 2003, after the villagers petitioned the Israeli High Court, the army removed its military base from the village, although it maintains other bases nearby.

Over the years, several villagers have been killed and dozens injured by Israeli army fire and by unexploded ordnance in the village's fields.

One of them, Haj Sami, head of the village council, was shot in the back when he was 16 and has been confined to a wheelchair ever since. He has campaigned tirelessly for the village, securing the international funding that has allowed the construction of the kindergarten, clinic, women's centre, mosque and roads. A library and a sewing workshop are currently being established. Such projects have prevented the village from disappearing. More than 100 children attend the kindergarten, including children who are currently forced to live in, and travel from, nearby villages.



Children playing in the kindergarten in 'Aqaba, April 2008

HOPE AND UNCERTAINTY

In 2004 the village petitioned the Israeli High Court to have the demolition orders rescinded. On 17 April 2008 the High Court heard the case and rejected the petition, arguing that it could not authorize “illegal” buildings. The Israeli army had told the Court that it was not planning to carry out demolitions in the centre of the village for the time being, yet to date the demolition orders have not been rescinded.

The central village area mentioned by the army comprises only a small percentage of the village’s land and includes public buildings constructed with international funds and several homes. However, 18 homes lie outside this area and are at greater risk of demolition. The villagers fear that if the Israeli army continues to demolish houses and to deny them building permits outside this small central area, the village will not be sustainable.



Mohammed Salah Talib with his family rebuilding their home (top). Mohammed Salah Talib’s grandchildren by the entrance of the cave where the family went to live after the demolition of their home in 2003 (above), May 2008.

Several families have had their homes in the village demolished in past years. Mohammed Salah Talib, aged 70 and a father of 12 children, could barely hold back the tears when he described to Amnesty International the demolition of his home on 23 April 2003:

“Israeli soldiers came with tanks and bulldozers, and got us out of the house – the whole family; me, my wife, our children and grandchildren. Then they destroyed the house and damaged the water reservoir. Since then I’ve been living in a nearby cave and some of my children were forced to move to another village. But this is where our land is, so now we are rebuilding our home. I was born here, we lived in a cave, as many other farmers did in those days, but the world has changed since then. I have worked hard all my life for my children; now they are married and have children and need homes of their own. They should not be forced to leave the village.”

His son Akram said: “When our home was destroyed my children were small; the youngest was only six; my little girl was born later. Our world crumbled; it was very difficult. We had to rent an apartment in another village, while my parents stayed here. It has taken a big effort to rebuild our house; it is not yet completely finished but we make do; I don’t want lose our home again and don’t want to leave.”



The kindergarten and Rural Women’s Association in ‘Aqaba, April 2006. The head of the village council, Haj Sami, is in his wheelchair in the courtyard.



The home of Iman Jabar, a mother of nine, is outside the area which the Israeli army indicates it may spare: "Our home was demolished once before, nine years ago. We rebuilt it and again have received demolition orders for the house and for the goats' pen. If our home is destroyed again where are we supposed to go? I have five daughters and four sons aged between 19 and five. As they grow up and have families of their own, they also will need homes, but if they are not allowed to build on our land they will be forced to move away. I live with this anguish all the time."

Iman Jabar and one of her children in their home (above left). Sheikha Sbeih outside the house she has built for her two youngest sons (above right), May 2008. Front cover: Israeli army bulldozer demolishing Palestinian homes, March 2008.

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Sheikha Sbeih, a widow and mother of 10, told Amnesty International: "All my children who got married were forced to leave 'Aqaba because they could not take the risk of building a home for it to be destroyed. I'm ill and can't have my children near me. I tried to build a small house for my two youngest sons, so that

they too won't have to leave when they get married. It's a small house, just two rooms each. But just as we finished building it, in May 2007, the demolition order arrived. If the house is demolished my sons won't be able to stay in the village and I will be left completely alone."

ACTION NEEDED NOW

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT TO:

- rescind all demolition orders in 'Aqaba and all demolition orders of unlicensed houses in Area C of the Occupied Palestinian Territories;
- transfer responsibility for planning and building policies and regulations in 'Aqaba and in the rest of Area C from the Israeli army to the local Palestinian communities.

Send appeals to:

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Salutation: Dear Minister

Major General Gadi Shamni
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Salutation: Dear Major General Shamni

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