

Peace Now slams announcement of new settlement construction

Crass bid to win votes, PN says

Peace Now has strongly condemned last Friday's move by the Netanyahu government to issue 450 construction tenders in the West Bank. Half of the units will be east of the separation barrier, and include units in a new neighbourhood known as East Migron. The January 30 announcement was the first of its kind since last October and ends a period of quiet freeze on new construction over the Green Line.

"The tenders are an example of pre-election underhanded opportunism by the housing minister and the prime minister, who are trying every minute to create facts on the ground and prevent a diplomatic solution," commented Yariv Oppenheimer, General Director of Peace Now.

"After embarrassing the Obama administration with the invitation to the congress, Netanyahu adds another slam in the face of the Americans, and showing no respect to Israel's closest ally."

The U.S. government has indeed expressed concern over the move. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said that although many of the tenders announced Friday are old, the Obama Administration believes this decision will "inflare tensions, further isolate Israel internationally and will not help Israel's security."

The U.K.'s rebuke was even sharper. "The UK's position on Israeli settlements is clear: they are illegal under international law. We urge the Government of Israel to reverse this decision. It is important to focus on steps that are conducive to peace," Minister for the Middle East Tobias Ellwood said in a statement.

Meanwhile, the spokesperson for European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini called for a reversal of "these decisions, thereby putting an end to settlement expansion."

The tenders in question include 102 units in the Hebron suburb of Kiryat Arba, 78 single-family homes in Alfei Menashe and 156 units in Elkana. The plans also call for 114 units in East Migron, a new neighbourhood born out of an agreement by which settlers would evacuate an outpost built on private Palestinian land and move to a new residential area east of the settlement of Adam. Residents violated the deal, and in the end were given an area closer to Migron. A few of the tenders also include commercial properties in Maale Adumim and Immanuel.

In addition to the settlement tenders issued on Friday, the Jerusalem Building and Planning Committee submitted a plan to establish 93 housing units in the southern Jerusalem neighbourhood of Gilo, also located over the Green Line. The plan was previously approved but held up for several years because of ownership issues.

Most of the units were proposed in bids in the past but were never sold for contractors. The government is now trying again to sell those units and promote their construction.

Sources: Peace Now web site (<http://www.peacenow.org.il/eng/NewTenders>) and Ha'aretz

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