
Israel Confirms It Plans To Seize West Bank Land

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In an email sent to Reuters, COGAT, a unit of Israel's Defence Ministry, said the political decision to seize the territory had already been taken and "the lands are in the final stages of being declared state lands".

The appropriation, first reported by Israel's Army Radio, covers 154 hectares (380 acres) in the Jordan Valley close to Jericho, an area where Israel already has many settlement farms built on land Palestinians seek for a state.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Wednesday denounced the seizure, which is the largest appropriation in the West Bank since August 2014.

"Settlement activities are a violation of international law and run counter to the public pronouncements of the government of Israel supporting a two-state solution to the conflict," Ban said in a statement.

The land, already partly farmed by Jewish settlers in an area fully under Israeli civilian and military control, is situated near the northern tip of the Dead Sea. No Palestinians currently live there.

Palestinian officials denounced the seizure on Wednesday, with Hanan Ashrawi, a senior member of the Palestine Liberation Organization, calling it a violation of international law.

"Israel is stealing land specially in the Jordan Valley under the pretext it wants to annex it," she told Reuters. "This should be a reason for a real and effective intervention by the international community to end such a flagrant and grave aggression which kills all chances of peace."

The United States, whose ambassador angered Israel this week with criticism of its West Bank policy, said on Wednesday it was strongly opposed to any move that accelerates settlement expansion.

"We believe they're fundamentally incompatible with a two-state solution and call into question, frankly, the Israeli

government's commitment to a two-state solution," Deputy State Department spokesman Mark Toner said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was scheduled to address the World Economic Forum in Davos on Thursday. It was not immediately clear if he would speak on the issue or if foreign diplomats would raise their concerns with him.

The Palestinians want to establish an independent state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, areas Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East War.

There are now about 550,000 Jewish settlers living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem combined, according to Israeli government and think-tank statistics. About 350,000 Palestinians live in East Jerusalem and 2.7 million in West Bank.

Israel is hoping that in any final agreement with the Palestinians it will be able to keep large settlement blocs close to Jerusalem and the Israeli border, as well as in the Jordan Valley, for security and agricultural purposes. The Palestinians are adamantly opposed.

The last round of peace talks broke down in April 2014 and Israeli-Palestinian violence has surged in recent months.

Since the start of October, Palestinian stabbings, car-rammings and shootings have killed 25 Israelis and a U.S. citizen. In the same period, at least 148 Palestinians have been killed, 94 of whom Israel has described as assailants. Most of the others died during violent demonstrations.
