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Israel vows to expand settlements after stabbings

Thousands attend services for five members of a family killed in their beds. While the hunt for their attackers continues, the Israeli government says it will build 500 more homes in the West Bank.

By Edmund Sanders, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Jerusalem

As thousands of Israelis gathered Sunday to bury five members of a family of Jewish settlers who were stabbed to death in their beds over the weekend, the government said it would respond to the attack by building an additional 500 homes in the West Bank.

Israeli security forces continued their manhunt for unknown infiltrators who broke into the heavily guarded settlement of Itamar, south of Nablus, and killed Udi and Ruth Fogel and three of their children, including an infant. The military has named no suspects, but officials are blaming Palestinian militants for the attack.

The government decision to expand housing construction in several large settlement blocs was intended to signal that Israel's presence in the West Bank will not be deterred by violence, officials said.

"This murder reminds everyone that the struggle and conflict is not about Israel's borders or about independence of a repressed nation, but a struggle for our existence," Vice Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon said at the funeral. "In this difficult hour we must rise from the rubble and do the most natural thing — continue building and developing Israel."

Earlier in the day, Interior Minister Eli Yishai said Israel should build 1,000 new homes in the West Bank for every Israeli that is killed there.

Palestinian leaders condemned the attack but criticized Israel's decision to accelerate settlements, saying it would heighten tensions and complicate peace efforts.

Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil abu Rudeineh called the expansion "wrong, unacceptable and rejected. The climate created by this decision brings nothing more than trouble. Peace needs courageous decisions."

The plans dimmed hopes of restarting U.S.-brokered peace talks, which collapsed last year. Israel's settlement construction has been a key obstacle to resuming negotiations. Palestinians have refused to enter talks as long as building continues in the West Bank, where they hope to one day have their own state. Most of the international community views the settlements as illegal because they are built on land seized by Israel during the 1967 war.

Emotions ran high around the country Sunday as government officials, prominent rabbis and friends and supporters of the Fogel family gathered in Jerusalem to offer support and condolences to surviving family members, including three other children who escaped harm. Many of the eulogies and mourners called for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to expand settlement construction and resist calls to make concessions to Palestinians.

The pressure is raising doubts about whether Netanyahu will proceed with what his aides had promised would be new peace initiative, expected to be unveiled in a speech in the coming weeks.

"The murder in Itamar places a huge question mark over the planned speech, particularly if it ignites a new wave of violence between Arabs and Jews," wrote Israel's Haaretz newspaper on Sunday.

In the West Bank, mobs of angry settlers have launched a string of revenge attacks against Palestinian villages, setting up roadblocks, throwing stones at Palestinians, raiding homes and burning cars in several towns, Palestinians said.

Fanning the public anger was the release by settler groups of what appear to be military crime-scene photographs, depicting the bloodied bodies of the victims with their faces digitally obscured. They said the family approved the release of the gruesome pictures in an effort to demonstrate the brutality of the attack.

Settler groups offered lukewarm praise for Netanyahu's approval of additional housing, which is expected be built in settlements such as Maale Adumim, Ariel, Kirya Sefer and Gush Etzion. Over the last six months, critics have accused Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak of quietly restricting construction permits.

"This decision by the government is a small step in the right direction," said Danny Dayan, head of the settler group Yesha Council. But he added, "It is deeply troubling that it requires the murder of children in the arms of their parents to achieve such an objective."

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