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Settler leaders warn of 'silent building freeze'

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Political echelon withholding permits for over 4,300 units that have already completed the planning process, settlers say.

Settler leaders warned Tuesday night that building would soon come to a grinding halt in nine of the largest settlements unless the relevant government ministries immediately authorize 4,321 planned units.

"The cities of Judea and Samaria are effectively frozen," Naftali Bennett, director-general of the Council of Jewish Communities of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip, told *The Jerusalem Post*. "The government has promised to stop the freeze, yet it is continuing it."

The Prime Minister's Office declined to comment on Tuesday night.

Most significantly, two of the biggest West Bank Jewish cities – Beitar Illit and Ma'aleh Adumim – which together, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, contributed to 38 percent of all settlement building from 2005- 2009, are almost out of permits.

While the international community has called on Israel to show it wants peace by stopping settlement construction, the council is now embarking on a "Save the Cities" campaign to urge the government to rescue some of the larger settlements by authorizing more building.

The media have largely spotlighted the work begun on hundreds of settler homes in the last month since the moratorium on such activity expired.

But, according to settlers, it is a temporary dust storm that will soon lead to a deadly calm.

In effect, Givat Ze'ev Local Council Chairman Yossi Avrahami said, the 10-month moratorium has been replaced by a silent, de facto freeze.

His experience, he said, is evidence of the vast discrepancy that can exist between what the government says, and what it actually does.

He is still waiting for approval for 507 units for the Agan Ha'ayalot project, which the government pledged to build in 2008, but which has yet to receive the proper permits.

Even Peace Now confirmed early last month, that building will soon stop in 14 of the largest 19 settlements, unless the Defense Ministry authorizes more construction and the Housing and Construction Ministry issues more tenders.

Under the "Save the Cities" campaign, the settler council is pushing for building permits to be issued in nine settlements for projects that need only a political okay, since the technical details have all been worked out.

These plans include 978 units in Beitar Illit; 800 in Alfei Menashe; 507 in Givat Ze'ev; 503 in Ariel; 435 in Efrat; 265 in Elkana; 213 in Ma'aleh Adumim; 134 in Geva Binyamin and 48 in Kiryat Arba.

All Israel's recent prime ministers, Ehud Olmert, Ariel Sharon and Ehud Barak, authorized new building, said Bennett.

But since the Netanyahu government took office in March 2009, the Defense Ministry had issued permits for 495 homes. Then, last November, it halted new construction for 10 months, said Bennett.

And now that the moratorium is over, the government is still freezing the cities.

"While Ariel is frozen, a new Palestinian city, Rawabi, is being built with tens of thousands of houses just 10 minutes away. If the land in Judea and Samaria is under dispute, why is only Jewish construction frozen?" said Bennett.

Ma'aleh Adumim Mayor Benny Kashriel noted that the campaign has only highlighted a small amount of the need.

His city, for example, has asked for 213 permits, a small number compared to the 1,682 homes built there from 2005-2009.

Nor does the campaign address the fact that the Defense Ministry has refused to permit even small construction jobs, such as extensions or porches.

“The time has come to take the authority to issue permits away from him [Barak],” Kashriel said, adding it was “absurd” to stop activity in a city located just outside Jerusalem that is expected to remain part of Israel in any final-status agreement.

Alfei Menashe Local Council Chairman Hisdai Eliezer has noted that it makes no sense for Netanyahu to announce that settlement construction has resumed, when in effect, he has halted it in most of the places where such work would reasonably happen.