

Palestinians struggle to build in West Bank

By Tom Perry

Reuters

Wednesday, December 9, 2009; 5:34 AM
 RAMALLAH, West Bank (Reuters) - In the occupied West Bank, a bedouin community whose school is made out of car tires and mud faces the same problem as a developer planning a whole new Palestinian town: building controls imposed by Israel.

As Israel enforces a partial, temporary freeze on building in its West Bank settlements, Palestinians and their government are struggling to develop their communities in large areas of the territory that fall under full Israeli jurisdiction.

Under interim peace agreements with the Palestinians, Israel exercises civil and military control in about 60 percent of the West Bank. Known as "Area C," the zone envelops settlements built since Israel occupied the West Bank in a 1967 war.

The Jahalin bedouin are Area C residents who gave up seeking permission to build long ago but want their children to read. They erected the makeshift school with the help of an Italian NGO this year, their community representative said.

"Many of our students are

illiterate due to the difficulty of getting to school," said Mohammed Qarashan, spokesman for a community that decades ago settled on land which he said they rent from two Palestinian villages.

"We never apply for any permissions because we know in advance none are given."

On the grounds that it was an unlicensed building, Israel issued a demolition order against the school, said Shlomo Lecker, an Israeli lawyer who represents the local bedouin.

He secured a court injunction against the order. But in the meantime, Israeli settlers living on a nearby hill had launched their own petition to demand it be knocked down, together with the shacks where the Jahalin live, he said.

Compounding the threats, the community sits on land Israel has set aside to widen a

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highway used by both Palestinians and Israelis. The Palestinians had been ready to relocate their camp but the Israeli authorities had not agreed to a permit that would allow them to reassemble it elsewhere, Lecker said.

"They demanded demolition without any guarantee that they could rebuild," he said.

Reuters made repeated requests for comment from the official body which oversees Israel's activities in the West Bank but at the time of publication it had not provided a response.

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