

Israel: Clashes between settlers and soldiers destabilise Sharon's coalition

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Israel's Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer has threatened to resign, faced with furious denunciations by the far right for the removal of hundreds of Jewish settlers from the illegal Havat Gilad, or Gilad Farms, in the West Bank.

Israeli Defence Forces, alongside the police, were sent to evacuate the settlement on Saturday October 19, the Jewish Sabbath, in an operation that resulted in violent clashes between the settlers and the soldiers. Stones and other objects thrown hurt 18 policemen, and ten settlers were injured during the forced evacuation.

Security forces tried several times to calm the situation. The Zar family, for whose son Gilad the settlement was named, arrived in an effort to prevent a confrontation between settlers and troops. Gilad Zar, a West Bank security officer, was killed in an ambush in May, 2001. Moshe Zar, the patriarch of the Zar family, was knocked unconscious and taken to hospital for treatment. He later returned to the site.

The next day the IDF demolished most of the remaining structures at the Havat Gilad settlement. At least 50 people were injured, including eight policemen, and nine were arrested, as rightist protesters clashed with security forces trying to dislodge them from the enclave near Nablus. Demonstrators set fire to a wheat field near the settlement, burned tires, and sabotaged a crane that was to be used to dismantle the settlement.

Ben-Eliezer said that the settlers were conducting an insurrection in resisting the army, and vowed to continue taking down illegal settlements "until the end." He warned of civil strife if settler leaders didn't rein in their supporters. In an interview with Israeli Radio, Kol Israel, Ben-Eliezer said, "The revolt of the settlers against the government is a life-and-death danger."

He faced immediate calls for his resignation, as fellow cabinet members within the Likud-led coalition government representing orthodox religious parties accused him of desecrating the Sabbath. Infrastructure Minister Effie Eitam, chairman of the settler-dominated National Religious Party, accused Ben-Eliezer of deceit, stupidity and cowardice for having allowed troops to be transported on the Sabbath in order to evacuate the settlement.

Haaretz daily reported that Eitam said: "There has been cabinet decision on this, and there is no [cabinet] backing for evacuating the settlements. It is a case of Fuad [Ben-Eliezer] bringing the Labour Party primaries into the camps of the army, into the government, to the soldiers."

Responding to Eitam, MK Haim Ramon—Ben-Eliezer's rival for chairmanship of the Labour Party—urged that Eitam himself be sacked, or if not that Labour might leave the government. He told *Haaretz*, "The defence minister should demand that the prime minister get rid of Effie Eitam, the defender of lawbreakers, who is himself an integral part of them, a group of semi-criminal elements which is trying to force its political doctrine onto an democratically elected government."

Later Eitam apologised for his comments, but Ben-Eliezer nevertheless said he was considering resignation due to the lack of support from colleagues. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had initially criticised the settlers for attacking security forces, but then ceded to the far right by publicly expressing his "great sorrow" for the "unnecessary, mass violation of the Sabbath that was imposed on hundreds of soldiers."

Sharon is in a precarious situation: he is reliant politically on Labour to stifle working class opposition to his warmongering and austerity measures, but the

settlers and other religious extremists are a key component of his own power base. Should the two sides continue to pull apart, his coalition could fall.

The situation shows no sign of abating. On Monday, about 200 people were reportedly rebuilding structures that had been partially destroyed by the army, including a synagogue. Troops have set up checkpoints near Nablus to prevent more settlers arriving.

Oren Zar, a settler, earlier told *Haaretz*: “We now intend to go up on this hilltop and stay there, as long as necessary, as many times as necessary, to establish a settlement here with all of our strength, without doubts, without compromises, without agreements, without being ‘thieves in the night.’”



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