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A glimpse at the Palestinians who build Israeli settlements

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It's a startling fact: The workers building Israel's West Bank settlements have generally been Palestinians - even though Palestinians widely consider these communities a toxic threat to their dream of an independent state.

Now comes a twist: earlier this year, the Palestinian government passed a law forbidding work in the settlements - and its determination to stamp out the phenomenon is being sorely tested in recent weeks, as a settlement building boomlet has emerged in the West Bank.

With the Palestinian economy facing double-digit unemployment, the issue has sparked some soul-searching and debate.

"It is immoral for us - totally immoral for us - to work in settlements," said Economics Minister Hassan Abu Libdeh, an enthusiastic supporter of the law which passed in April and bans Palestinians from such work.

Abu Libdeh said the ban - which imposes fines of up to \$14,000 and jail time of up to five years for violators - will eventually be enforced. But for now, he said, the government is holding off while it searches for ways to help workers switch jobs.

About 21,000 Palestinians currently work in settlements, either in construction, agriculture or industry. Their ability to return to the settlements in recent years - after a period of violence from 2000-2005 which saw the two peoples separated almost completely - has been key to the mini-revival of the Palestinian economy.

But it is also helping the settlements prosper and expand.

Some 300,000 Israelis live in more than 120 settlements across the West Bank - almost a threefold increase over two decades of peace negotiations. Another 180,000 live in east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians hope to make their capital.

In the settlement of Ariel on Wednesday, Palestinian laborers readily admitted they were torn between politics and paychecks.

Dozens of them mixed cement, laid bricks and arranged red tiles on the roofs of 48 new apartments at a dusty construction site in what is already a town boasting 19,000 residents.

Most work eight-hour shifts five days a week and earn between \$35 and \$55 per day - which is somewhat less than what Israeli workers would cost, but more than what is generally available to Palestinians in the West Bank. There, similar jobs usually pay \$25 per day in the Palestinian cities and \$15 in rural areas.

Sitting inside a yellow tractor, Abed Abdel-Karim, 41, said he'd been working in settlements for 15 years. He said they threaten the future Palestinian state but said he has no other way to earn a living.

He acknowledged it was a problem, but "it's not my job to fix it ... I'm married and have kids. I don't want to be a millionaire. I just want to pay my bills."

Palestinians have opposed the settlements since Israel captured East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from Jordan in the 1967 Mideast war. Supported by most of the world community, they consider the West Bank occupied territory and say moving Israeli civilians there violates international law. Israel calls it disputed territory and says it can build there until a peace deal is reached.

The settlements emerged as a hugely contentious issue in the U.S.-led peace talks launched in September. It was Israel's decision to end a 10-month moratorium on new construction that caused the talks to grind to a halt just weeks later

Now there are hundreds of new units in various stages of construction - and Palestinians, just as before, are at the heart of the enterprise, despite the ban.

Palestinian Labor Minister Ahmed Majdalani said that one way the government is trying to combat the phenomenon is the creation of an investment fund aimed at supporting large-scale construction projects and other Palestinian employers.

The fund, announced in May, is hoping to tap international donors, but so far the only moneys have come from the Palestinian Authority itself - \$5 million, or a tenth of the \$50 million target.

Even if the fund takes off, Palestinian companies will likely continue to pay less than Israeli ones. But Majdalani said he's counting on national pride and fear of punishment to entice workers away from settlements.

"We don't consider the difference in pay a justification for anyone to go work in the settlements - not nationalistically, politically or morally," he said.

Another possible solution for the Palestinian workers is the planned city of Rawabi, which will be built from the ground up for 40,000 residents; but this massive project remains on hold because Israel has not given builders permission for a key access road.

At the construction site in Ariel, 32-year-old Abdel-Jaber Bouzia was doubtful any of these schemes would work. He did not fear the legal ban on working in the settlements and could hardly imagine their removal.

"Maybe after a million years," he said, shoveling sand into a rumbling cement mixer. "Or on Judgment Day."

What do the settlers say?

Settler spokeswoman Aliza Herbst noted that some settlements themselves ban Arab labor, sometimes due to security concerns, but it remains attractively cheap and abundant.

She said she supports the Palestinian government's efforts because she would prefer employers were freed of the financial temptation and hired Jews instead.

"I hope they succeed," she said.

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