Residents of the Yitzhar in the West Bank stole a military tent near their settlement this week. The tent was intended as an Israel Defense Forces post to keep Palestinians from illegally setting up structures of their own in the area, IDF officials said.

The settlers have returned the canvas but have not complied with the army's demand that they give back all the tent parts.

"The feeling is a bit that we're being stabbed in the back," said a senior officer in the army's Judea and Samaria Division. "This is a very serious incident. Beyond the element of theft, which is unacceptable in any case, there is a very small group of Yitzhar residents who violate the law and act like violent thugs, and we will do all we can to continue to enforce the law and put in jail anyone who deserves it and carries out violent and illegal activities."

The officer said settlers like these tent thieves are a minority and that 95 percent of settlers cooperate with the IDF.

Yitzhar officials said in a statement that the incident was nothing but a juvenile prank.

"We see no interest in blowing up the issue beyond its true proportions – a juvenile incident carried out by several young people who dismantled an empty tent and left it nearby," the statement said. "The yishuv secretariat acted to return it speedily to the IDF."

The tent was set up on Saturday between Yitzhar and the neighboring village of Orif, near Nablus after the IDF was informed that the Orif's Popular Resistance Committees were planning to take over the area and create an illegal outpost of their own, as they did several
weeks ago. Security forces fear that this would spark violent confrontations with the settlers.

Yitzhar settlers said Friday that if the army doesn’t act to keep the Palestinians from setting up shop, they would set up a Jewish outpost in the same spot.

When soldiers set up the tent, some settlers attacked them verbally over the army’s role in evacuating settlement outposts. Later that day, after it appeared that the Palestinians would not be moving in on the area, the soldiers returned to their base, leaving the tent where it was to prevent the Palestinians from approaching.

Two hours later, the company commander discovered during a patrol of the area that the tent had been stolen.

Operating on the assumption that the theft was carried out by residents of Yitzhar, an IDF official asked the settlement leadership to return the tent immediately. A short time later, the canvas was returned but not the other pieces.

The army has asked police to investigate the incident.