

Rabbi warns of 'new intifada' as Palestinian-settler tensions rise

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Jerusalem, 27 September (ENI)--Hours after a freeze on West Bank Israeli settlement construction expired, bulldozers moved into an area close to Revava, near the northern West Bank city of Nablus, with many residents mindful of an earlier reminder that settler activity can be volatile.

At a joint press conference in Paris with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, on 27 September, expressed his regret that Israel had not extended the moratorium on new settlement building which had expired at the preceding midnight.

A shooting incident in East Jerusalem on 22 September, in which a Palestinian man died, and the death of a young child two days later, had shown the volatility that exists when Israeli settlers move into areas where Palestinians live.

Rioting began after a private Israeli security guard shot and killed 32-year-old Samer Sarhan, a father of five, in the East Jerusalem village of Silwan. A 14-month-old Palestinian baby died two days later from tear gas inhalation in another village, to which the violence had spread.

"We are in an extremely dangerous situation right now. We have been warning for over a year that things are really at boiling point, that we are in serious danger of a third intifada exploding, which nobody wants," said Rabbi Arik Ascherman, executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights, on 26 September. His statement came after four days of violence following the death of Sarhan.

Israeli police said the security guard killed Sarhan in the early morning. They said a group of Palestinians had blocked and stoned a car in which a number of guards were travelling. Palestinians say the guards had stopped their car near a group of unarmed men during a morning patrol, and then an argument broke out, which led

to the shooting.

Rabbis for Human Rights activists went to the scene during the following weekend in an effort to keep tensions from escalating, said Ascherman. "We attempt to prevent excessive violence by Israeli security forces in a way which does not encourage Palestinian violence," he explained.

Ascherman added that though Palestinians are concerned about the possible renewal of construction in the settlements, "The greatest frustration area is East Jerusalem."

Jewish settlers claim a connection to Silwan as being the biblical "City of David" that King David built outside Jerusalem's city walls, and have been conducting extensive archaeological excavations on the site.

Christian pilgrims also revere the site as the place where Jesus restored the sight of a blind man by the Pool of Siloam. In 2004, the remains of a water pool from the time of the second temple were uncovered. This extended an already known waterway, and matched descriptions of the pool by Byzantine pilgrims.

More recently, Silwan became a flash point in East Jerusalem, when Jewish settlers took over a building, known as Beit Yonatan, which they say was once Jewish property. Despite a subsequent municipal eviction order being issued, no steps have been taken to remove the settlers. At the same time, some 22 Palestinian homes in the area have been threatened with demolition, as the municipality plans to create an archaeological park there.

On its Web site, the BBC describes the contentious area as follows: "Israel has occupied East Jerusalem since 1967. It annexed the area in 1981 and sees it as its exclusive domain. Under international law the area is considered to be occupied territory."