



Palestinian family in cave home faces Israeli eviction

Forbidden caves

AFF | Farasin, Palestinian Territories

Ahmed Amarneh's home, with a wooden door opening onto cushion-lined rooms, is not the first Palestinian residence in the occupied West Bank to receive a demolition notice from Israel.

But it may be the first built inside a cave which the Jewish state has threatened to destroy.

Amarneh, a 30-year-old civil engineer, lives with his family in the northern West Bank village of Farasin, where Israel insists it must approve any new residential construction and can tear down homes built without permits.

"I tried twice to build (a house), but the occupation authorities told me it was forbidden to build in the area," Amarneh said, using a term for Israel used by some Palestinians.

The Oslo peace accords of the

1990s gave the Palestinians self-rule in parts of the West Bank.

However, some 60 per cent of the territory dubbed Area C, where Farasin is located, remains under full Israeli civil and military control.

The United Nations considers Area C as occupied Palestinian Territory.

But Israel has increasingly allocated land there for construction of Jewish settlements -- communities considered illegal under international law.

Convinced he would never get Israeli approval to build a home in his village, Amarneh set his sights on a cave in the foothills overlooking Farasin.

Amarneh said he figured that as an ancient, natural formation, Israel could not possibly argue that the cave was illegally built, while the Palestinian Authority (PA) agreed to register the land in his name.

'I didn't make the cave'

Amarneh, whose handyman skills are considerable, sealed the entrance to the cave with a stone wall and installed a wooden door at its centre.

He fashioned a kitchen, a living room and sleeping areas for himself, his pregnant wife and their young daughter. There is even lodging for guests.

He said he had been living there for a year and half, but received a demolition notice from the Israeli authorities in July, along with 20 other Palestinian families in Farasin.

The Israeli military branch responsible for civilian affairs in the West Bank, COGAT, said demolition notices were served to some Farasin residences because of "structures that were illegally built, without the necessary permits and approvals".

Amarneh said he was "surprised" to learn that he had built anything illegally.

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"I didn't make the cave. It has existed since antiquity," he said, holding his young daughter in his arms. "I don't understand how they can prevent me from living in a cave. Animals live in caves and are not thrown out. So, let them treat me like an animal and let me live in the cave."

'Ancestors buried here'

Arab residents established the village of Farasin in 1920, said local council head Mahmud Ahmad Nasser.

It was abandoned during the

1967 Six-Day War, the year Israeli occupation of the West Bank began.

But from the 1980s, former residents began to return to the area. Nasser put its current population at around 200.

Farasin looks less like a village than a small collection of houses spaced widely apart.

The PA officially recognised the community of Farasin in March, but the coronavirus crisis has prevented it from providing electricity to the area, the local council said.

COGAT had indicated in April that it might suspend some scheduled demolitions due to the pandemic.

But, according to the Israeli anti-settlement campaign group B'Tselem, Israel in June demolished 63 Palestinian structures.

Roughly 450,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank, alongside some 2.7 million Palestinians.

Farasin residents, aside from fearing the possibly imminent arrival of bulldozers, said they have spotted a caravan belonging to a Jewish settler in the area, who appeared to be setting up a home.

"The settler arrived here some time ago with his sheep," said Nasser, the local council head, asking why a settler would arrive at the moment they have been asked to leave.

"Our people lived here for generations. Our ancestors are buried here."

Captive beluga whales released into Iceland sea sanctuary

● **Little White and Little Grey, two 13-year-old females, left behind their previous lives entertaining visitors at the Changfeng Ocean World in June 2019**

Phys.org

Two beluga whales from a Shanghai aquarium have returned to the sea in an Icelandic sanctuary, conservationists said Monday, expressing hopes of creating a model for rehoming some 300 belugas currently in captivity.

Little White and Little Grey, two 13-year-old females, left behind their previous lives entertaining visitors at the Changfeng Ocean World in June 2019 when they were flown to Iceland's Klettsvik Bay in the Westman Islands, in specially tailored containers.

On Friday, they were moved from their landbased facility to care pools in the sea at Klettsvik



The whales each weigh 900 kilogrammes (2,000 pounds) and measure four metres (13 feet).

Bay—the first time the two belugas have been in the sea since they were taken from a Russian whale research centre in 2011, the conservation charity Sea

Life Trust said in a statement on Monday.

They will stay in the care pools "for a few weeks" before they are released into the bigger

sanctuary, a 32,000-square-metre (344,445-square-foot) sea pen that will become their home, organisers said.

Little Grey and Little White

"will need a short period of time to acclimatise to their new natural environment and all the outdoor elements before they are released into the wider sanctuary in Klettsvik Bay," the statement said. After having been cared for by humans for so many years, it is unlikely the belugas would survive in the wild.

The pen is thus sealed off by nets that still allow sea life, such as fish, to swim through.

'Ambassadors'

Andy Bool, the head of Sea Life Trust, said the belugas' release "was as smooth as we had hoped and planned for."

"We are carefully monitoring Little Grey and Little White with our expert care team and veterinarians," he said.

Bool said the whales were "ambassadors for the 300 other belugas that are in human care across the world."

"We hope to show that Little White and Little Grey thrive in this bay, and we're conducting a research study ... that will hopefully show that there's a welfare benefit to being in a natural en-

vironment like this.

"We hope that can then persuade others that maybe their beluga whales might be better off in a different environment," Bool said.

Ahead of their sea transfer, the whales were trained to hold their breath longer, become physically stronger to cope with tides and currents, and put on blubber to help them cope with colder water temperatures.

The whales each weigh 900 kilogrammes (2,000 pounds) and measure four metres (13 feet).

Originally from Russian Arctic waters, it is thought they were two or three years old when captured. Belugas typically live for 40 to 60 years.

According to Sea Life Trust, Klettsvik Bay is the world's first open water beluga sanctuary.

Klettsvik is also where Keiko, the killer whale in the 1993 film "Free Willy", was flown in 1998. The orca was fully released in 2002 but did not manage to adapt to life in the wild and died 18 months later in a Norwegian fjord.