

Israeli troops fight Jewish settlers in Hebron

 AP Associated Press

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HEBRON, West Bank – Israeli soldiers hauled Jewish settlers out of a disputed house in the West Bank city of Hebron Thursday, firing tear gas and stun grenades to subdue the extremists who pelted them with rocks, eggs and chemicals. Rioting by settlers quickly spread to other parts of the Palestinian territory.

Settlers set fires around two Palestinian homes, attacked motorists and burned tires to protest the eviction in Hebron. Others blocked the main road to Jerusalem, and scuffled with police who tried to disperse them. Palestinians reported one person injured by settler gunfire.

The army declared the entire Hebron region a "closed military zone," barring nonresidents from entering.

Hebron, a city of 170,000 Palestinians with about 500 of the most extreme Jewish settlers living in their midst, has for decades been a focal point of Israeli-Arab violence. The biblical city is the traditional burial site of Abraham, the shared patriarch of both Jews and Muslims, and that shrine is a major source of friction in Hebron.

In 1994, Jewish extremist Baruch Goldstein from the settlement of Kiryat Arba on the outskirts of Hebron, gunned down 29 Palestinians praying at the mosque surrounding Abraham's grave before he himself was killed in the melee.

Thursday's eviction was the first major evacuation of settlers in the West Bank since a violent 2006 confrontation over the Amona outpost in another part of the West Bank that injured dozens.

About 275,000 Jewish settlers live among 1.8 million Palestinians in the West Bank. For decades, Israel has pampered the settlers as brave pioneers, and the government continues to shy away from confronting them.

Settlers have built more than 100 unauthorized outposts on West Bank hilltops. But Israel's government has failed to take them down despite promises to the U.S. to do so and has even built roads and provided services for some of them.

Israel wants to hold on to major blocs of West Bank settlements in any land-for-peace deal with Palestinians.

In the latest clash, some 600 soldiers and policemen took over the disputed Hebron house in a surprise operation. They quickly began dragging out people barricaded inside one by one, their hands and legs held by teams of two or four officers. Young boys and girls scuffled with police, punching and hitting soldiers. Security forces in full riot gear used stun grenades and tear gas to repel the settlers.

Army spokeswoman Maj. Avital Leibovitz said the evacuation was completed in about 20 minutes.

After they were forcibly removed, the settlers attempted to go back into the four-story building, but soldiers formed a human chain around it to keep them out.

"This is an act of scoundrels, Jews evicting Jews from their homes," settler leader Daniella Weiss told Israel's Channel 10 TV.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's spokesman Mark Regev countered: "In Israel, the rule of law prevails and not the rule of the vigilante."

Israel's rescue service said 25 people on both sides were hurt. One of the settlers sustained serious head wounds, and he was whisked into an ambulance on a stretcher. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said a policeman was moderately injured after a chemical liquid was tossed in his face.

Nearby, fist fights broke out between settler youths and Palestinians. Israeli rescue services deployed two helicopters along with a fleet of ambulances to the scene to evacuate the wounded.

Police said they arrested 11 rioters who stoned officers.

More than a dozen settler families took over the disputed house in March 2007 and remained there despite a series of eviction orders. The residents claimed they bought it from a Palestinian but the alleged seller denies the claim and Israeli authorities have not recognized the sale as legal.

Settlers say about 20 families were living in the building, but the population appears to fluctuate between a few dozen and a few hundred, with any rumor of an impending eviction sending people rushing in from nearby settlements.

Israel's Supreme Court ordered the house evacuated last month. The settlers, fearing eviction, have stepped up violence in recent months.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak said he ordered the army to evict the settlers after all attempts to persuade them to leave peacefully failed. Barak had met with settler leaders earlier in the day but they failed to reach a compromise.

Settler leaders reacted angrily to the army raid.

"This could have been done peacefully and legally. Instead Barak chose violence," said Danny Dayan, leader of the Yesha settler council. "This surprised us completely. He threw a match in a pile of gun powder."

The lightning-quick raid drew immediate reaction from across the political spectrum. Ultranationalist lawmaker Arie Elad accused Barak of using the army for political purposes. Barak's Labor party was holding its primaries on Thursday.

"No doubt this came too late but it's better late than never," countered dovish lawmaker Avshalom Vilan. "This was a test for the rule of law and it shows there is one law for everybody."

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