**Israel denies visas to UN human rights staff after settlement blacklist**

By: Lahav Harkov

Jerusalem Post

October 15, 2020

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/israel-denies-visas-to-un-human-rights-staff-after-settlement-blacklist-645864>

Israel has declined to renew the visas of most of the international workers of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in the months after its publication of a blacklist of companies doing business in Judea and Samaria.

OHCHR spokesman Rupert Colville confirmed on Thursday that nine out of 12 foreign staff members have left Israel since August, because their visas were not renewed. Three other workers who were to begin working in Israel were not allowed entry, and another three remain until their visas expire in the coming months.

The Foreign Ministry declined to comment on the matter but referred to a statement from former foreign minister Israel Katz about the OHCHR’s settlement blacklist.

The UN published its database in February of 112 businesses operating in east Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and Judea and Samaria. It was the first list of its kind about any country.

Although the list did not specifically accuse the companies of violating international law, Israel, which argues that such business activity is legal, feared the blacklist would be used to support boycotts.

At the time, the Foreign Ministry announced it was cutting ties with the OHCHR, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that “whoever boycotts us will be boycotted.”

Some OHCHR staff visas were renewed for short periods in March and June, but all renewal requests submitted since June have been rejected.

The OHCHR offices in Israel have not closed, and 26 Israeli and Palestinian workers remain but the international staff were working remotely anyway due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so Colville said that “operationally speaking, there has been little impact so far.”

Still, over time, the absence of international staff from the West Bank “will obviously negatively impact on our ability to carry out our mandate in the best way possible,” he added.

“We continue to hope that this situation will be resolved soon and we are actively engaged with various relevant and concerned parties to that end,” Colville stated.

“It is important to note that our staff regularly monitor and report on all human rights violations that take place in the territory they cover, whether committed by or against Palestinians or Israelis, migrants or others.”

In response to the Israeli government acting on its threat against the OHCHR, Anne Herzberg, legal adviser for the NGO Monitor think tank said “this development is not surprising given OHCHR’s official embrace of efforts to damage the Israeli economy.

“High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet caved to the demands of BDS activists to publish a blacklist of Israeli companies and refused to interact with NGOs that opposed this campaign,” Herzberg said. “In addition, local OHCHR officials have refused to meet with leading Israeli experts on issues such as juvenile justice, because those experts did not fully embrace the Palestinian narrative. These actions suggest OHCHR’s willingness to be a party to the conflict rather than abide by its humanitarian obligations of impartiality and non-politicization.”

In the February statement that the Foreign Ministry referred to on Thursday, Katz called the list a “stain” on the OHCHR and called Bachelet an accomplice of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.

“The Commissioner wasted an opportunity to preserve the dignity of the UN and salvage what was left of the [Human Rights] Council and Commission’s integrity. This decision will have serious implications for our future relations with the Council and the Commissioner,” Katz said.

Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, who was strategic affairs minister at the time, said in February that the list was compiled in cooperation with NGOs that are affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, recognized as a terrorist organization by the US, the EU and others.

Diplomatic sources said at the time that Israel had only been given an hour’s notice about the list’s publication, and it was from the US, not from Bachelet.

Joint List MK Yousef Jabareen called the rejected visa renewals “a continuation of a policy of persecuting human rights activists that are supervising the violations of Palestinians’ human rights.”

Jabareen said Israel is the one with a blacklist, in that it is trying to limit human rights workers’ movement, and that doing so violates international law.