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Palestinian farmers

Not much of an olive branch

The plight of rural Palestinians on the West Bank is as grim as ever

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“WHAT did the trees do?” says Muhammad Abu Awad, a retired teacher of agriculture and father of 14 children, as he looks gloomily at his ravaged field. Twisted, silvery stubs are all that remain of a lush grove that once offered up a yearly abundance of fat green olives.

The vandals came at night from Adei Ad, a Jewish settlers' outpost deemed “illegal” even by the Israeli government, near Shvut Rachel, an established West Bank settlement that is judged illegal in international but not Israeli law. Working fast, unnoticed by Palestinian landowners in the nearby Arab village of al-Mughayir, the settlers cut down nearly 200 olive trees, of which 70 belonged to Mr Abu Awad. As a result, he reckons to have lost income worth around $3,400 that he would have earned from this year's harvest. But that is not all. “I planted these trees with my own hands 35 years ago”, he says, wistfully touching the stumps, now wrapped in sackcloth to protect them from the sun. Mr Abu Awad hopes his trees will recover and one day bear fruit again.

As usual at harvest time, tension between Palestinian farmers and Jewish settlers has risen. The olive tree deeply stirs the emotions of Palestinians. It is a symbol of their struggle and a vital part of their rural economy. According to their ministry of agriculture, nearly 500,000 olive trees have been bulldozed, burnt down or uprooted in the territories since the second *intifada* (uprising) began in 2000. Israel's army has cleared swathes of groves to create open areas in the Gaza Strip and along the security barrier being built on the western side of the West Bank, often taking big bites out of Palestinian land. The Israelis have also cut down thousands of trees near the Jewish settlements. Palestinians and human-rights groups have repeatedly castigated the Israeli army for failing to stop such

destruction. The settlers say terrorists hide among the trees.

In recent years the Palestinians have usually been able to pick their olives under the protection of the Israeli army and police. Charities that help the farmers say the army has been taking this job seriously, letting the Palestinians harvest without being harassed by the settlers. But they criticise the soldiers for hectoring the farmers into rushing the picking and say the soldiers could do more to protect the trees before the harvest begins, especially in hot spots near ideologically extreme settlements.

Many of the settlers pursue a “price-tag policy”, deliberately instigating violence and mayhem so that the Israeli military and political establishment is loth to take action, such as evacuating the 100-plus “illegal” settlements, for fear of further violence. As international criticism has mounted, even in America, several Israeli governments have promised to dismantle the outposts but so far little has been done. The settlers are generally against the peace process, because it could mean their expulsion. So whenever there are signs of negotiation, they increase their attacks – among other things, on olive trees. They want to show who controls the land. Binyamin Netanyahu's right-wing Israeli government has plainly emboldened the settlers. “Now they fear no one,” says a Palestinian villager in al-Mughayir. When the ruling politicians seem to back the settlers, the Israeli soldiers feel less obliged to protect the Palestinian farmers.

Mr Abu Awad says he is determined to fight to keep his land. “I'll sleep on my land to protect it,” he says. “I tell my children: if I die, they should bury me where my blood was spilled. I'm in love with my land.”