

Jewish settlers replace Korans burnt in West Bank

By Joseph Nasr, **BEIT FAJJAR, West Bank** | Tue 5 Oct 2010
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Rabbi and peace activist Menachem Froman (C) speaks to a Palestinian during a visit to a mosque after Monday's attack in the West Bank village of Beit Fajar near Bethlehem 5 October 2010. Jewish settlers on Tuesday gave Korans to Palestinians in the West Bank village whose mosque was burned in an attack blamed on militants in the settler movement.



(Reuters) - Jewish settlers on Tuesday gave new copies of the Koran to Palestinians in a West Bank village whose mosque was burned in an attack blamed by Palestinians on militants in the settler movement.

Several copies of Islam's holy book were scorched in the arson attack and threats in Hebrew were scrawled on the wall of the mosque of Beit Fajar early on Monday.

The village sits on the edge of the sprawling Jewish settlement bloc of Gush Etzion.

Suspicion immediately fell on settler militants opposed to a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, in which some settlements would be turned over to a Palestinian state.

"This visit is to say that although there are people who oppose peace, he who opposes peace is opposed to God," said Rabbi Menachem Froman, a well-known peace activist and one of a handful of settlers who went to Beit Fajjar to show solidarity with their Muslim neighbors.

Froman and other liberal Jews and Palestinians who advocate coexistence held a demonstration by a busy West Bank highway junction, displaying banners saying: "We all want to live in peace." But fewer than 20 people turned out.

"I would like to see more people come to events like this," said Aharon Frasier, a young American-born rabbi from a nearby settlement who wanted to express his "strong objections" to an attack that contradicts Jewish values.

"We can't leave it to the politicians. We have to do what we believe in" to build peace and security, he said.

STONE-THROWING YOUTHS

When Israeli security forces prevented Beit Fajjar Palestinians from joining what was supposed to be their joint demonstration, Palestinians youths began throwing stones at the troops, who fired tear-gas in response.

No injuries were reported.

One ultra-Orthodox young Jewish bystander in traditional black garb seemed baffled by the demonstration. "A demonstration against the burning of the mosque?" he asked reporters. "Have the settlers all turned left-wing?"

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has called for calm while the Israeli and Palestinian leaders try to avert the collapse of U.S.-backed peace negotiations, condemned the mosque attack and urged police to track down the arsonists.

Any flare-up of violence in the West Bank poses a direct threat to peace talks that were launched just a month ago but suspended by the Palestinians last week when a 10-month Israeli moratorium on building new houses in West Bank Jewish settlements expired.

On the eve of a Washington summit to launch the direct negotiations on Sept 2, four Jewish settlers were killed in a shooting attack for which the militant Palestinian Islamist group Hamas claimed responsibility.

(Additional reporting by Mustafa Abu Ganeya and Ammar Awad; Writing by Douglas Hamilton)