

Water supplies cut off because of debts
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'Moshavim dying as politicians argue'

By DAVID-RUDGE

MERON - Residents of debt-ridden moshavim in Galilee have condemned calls for a parliamentary inquiry into the financial plight of the country's farming settlements and demanded immediate government aid.

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"If we have to wait for the establishment of another committee, there will be nothing left to save," declared Ya'acov Ivgi, secretary of Moshav Avivim, situated on the border with Lebanon.

The call for a parliamentary inquiry to investigate the cause of the financial collapse of the farming settlements has been made by Likud Knesset faction chairman Haim Kaufman.

"While the politicians talk and accuse one another, our settlements are dying," charged Ivgi.

The plight of Moshav Avivim and several other settlements in the Merom HaGalil region have been exacerbated by water cuts imposed by the Mekorot national water company because of unpaid debts.

Mekorot has turned off supplies to the moshavim, except for two hours every day. The water company's spokesman Mordechai Yacovich said they had taken the step as a last resort after the settlements had ignored repeated requests to pay off debts totalling millions of shekels which date back to June.

He noted that Mekorot, unlike other creditors of the moshavim, was legally bound to charge for water supplies and could not afford to waive payments indefinitely.

The effects of the water cutbacks, added to other economic woes, are taking their toll on the 400 residents of Avivim.

"This is the fourth consecutive week of disruptions to the water supplies and I don't know how much longer we can hold out," said Ivgi.

"If we don't get help soon, we'll simply set up camp in tents in Jerusalem and start all over again as new immigrants because there won't be anything left here," he added.

But later yesterday, Mekorot partially restored the flow of water to Moshav Avivim after it became clear that the same source supplied drinking water for IDF troops serving in the north.

The resumption followed a request to the water company from OC Northern Command Aluf Yossi Peled. Cutbacks continued, however, to several other moshavim in the Merom Hagalil region because of unpaid debts.

Merom HaGalil regional council chairman Aharon Matok, said water cuts were pushing the hardest-hit moshavim to the point of total disintegration. "They would pay their debts if they could, but they simply don't have any money," he said.

Matok said that of the 28 farming settlements in the region, 16 were in dire financial straits. "We fear that the suggestion of another committee will only lead to further delays in distributing aid to the settlements."

The concern was echoed by farmers in Western Galilee where several settlements have also suffered short-term water deprivation because of unpaid debts.

Reuven Cohen secretary of Moshav Ya'arah, another "confrontation-line" settlement, said that after two days of cutbacks, Mekorot reopened the taps on condition of payment by the end of this month.

"We might be able to pay off the previous debts, but I don't know what we'll do after that. We are already living under the threat of the bailiffs and now they threaten our livelihoods. We depend on water for our livestock and our orchards, as well as being able to drink and keep ourselves clean," he added.