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Israel expanded the municipal boundaries to take in large areas of vacant land on which it later constructed Jewish settlements while expansion of Palestinian neighborhoods was limited forcing residents to build illegally

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Israeli authorities have demolished at least 140 Palestinian homes in east Jerusalem this year, a rights group said Thursday, the highest annual number since it began keeping records in 2004.

The demolition of homes built without permits comes amid a major increase in Jewish settlement activity both in east Jerusalem and in the occupied West Bank since President Donald Trump took office.

The Israeli rights group B'Tselem said 238 Palestinians have lost their homes this year, including 127 minors. The second highest number of demolitions on record was in 2016, when 92 homes were demolished.

Israeli officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Israel captured east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Six Day War, lands the Palestinians want for their future state.

Israel annexed east Jerusalem that year in a move not recognized internationally and considers the entire city its capital.

Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017, breaking with a longstanding international consensus and angering the Palestinians, who off cut all contacts with the White House in response.

Shortly after capturing east Jerusalem, Israel expanded the municipal boundaries to take in large areas of vacant land on which it later constructed Jewish settlements.

At the same time, it sharply limited the expansion of Palestinian neighborhoods, forcing many in the increasingly crowded areas to build illegally.

Last month another Israeli rights group, Peace Now, obtained official figures on building permits in east Jerusalem going back to 1991 that provided strong evidence of systematic discrimination against Palestinian residents.

While Palestinians make up more than 60% of the population of east Jerusalem, they had received just 30% of permits.

As a result, Peace Now estimates that half of the 40,000 housing units built in Palestinian neighborhoods since 1967 lack permits, placing them at constant risk of demolition.

In many cases, owners choose to demolish their own homes to avoid the high fees charged by Israeli authorities. Of the 140 units demolished this year, 31 were dismantled by their owners, B'Tselem said.

It said commercial structures are also being demolished at the highest rate on record, with 76 dismantled so far this year, compared to 70 in all of 2018.

The B'Tselem figures only cover homes demolished because they were built illegally, and do not include those destroyed for punitive reasons following attacks that kill or wound Israelis.

Israel says demolishing the family homes of alleged militants deters violence, while the Palestinians see it as a form of collective punishment.

The Israeli military said Thursday that it demolished a partially built structure in a refugee camp in the West Bank city of Ramallah overnight.

It said the structure was being built on the site of the family home of a Palestinian militant who had killed an Israeli officer during an operation in May 2018.

The military said the residence was demolished in December of that year, and that troops returned after they noticed that new construction was underway.

It also said dozens of Palestinians hurled rocks and firebombs at the Israeli troops during the demolition and that soldiers responded with "riot dispersal means." It said there were no injuries among the soldiers.

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British PM calls for Dec. 12 election to break Brexit deadlock extended to Jan 31

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Boris Johnson says in a letter to opposition Labour leader he would hand parliament more time to approve his deal to leave EU but that lawmakers must back a December vote, his third attempt to try to force a snap poll

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LONDON - British Prime Minister Boris Johnson called Thursday for a general election on Dec. 12 to break the Brexit impasse, conceding for the first time he will not meet his "do or die" deadline to leave the European Union next week.

Johnson said in a letter to opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn he would hand parliament more time to approve his Brexit deal but that lawmakers must back a December election, Johnson's third attempt to try to force a snap poll.

Just a week before Britain was due to leave the European Union, the bloc looks set to grant Johnson a Brexit delay, something he has repeatedly said he does not want but was forced to request by the country's divided parliament.

An **election** is seen by his team as the **only way of breaking the deadlock over Brexit** after parliament voted in favour of his deal, but then, just minutes later, rejected his preferred timetable which would have met his Oct. 31 deadline.

But he has twice failed before to win the votes in parliament for an election, where he needs the support of two-thirds of its 650 lawmakers. The main opposition Labour Party has repeatedly said it will only back an election when it is sure that he cannot lead Britain out of the EU without a deal.

"This parliament has refused to take decisions. It cannot refuse to let the voters replace it with a new parliament that can make decisions," he wrote to Corbyn.

"Prolonging this paralysis into 2020 would have dangerous consequences for businesses, jobs and for basic confidence in democratic institutions, already badly damaged by the behaviour of parliament since the referendum. Parliament cannot continue to hold the country hostage."

In parliament after the government announced the new vote on an election for Monday, Labour's parliamentary business manager Valerie Vaz did not say whether the party would back the move, saying only it would wait to see what the EU says about a delay on Friday.

Dead deadline

More than **three years after voting 52%-48%** to be the first sovereign country to leave the European project, the future of Brexit is as unclear as ever with Britain still debating **when, how or even whether** it should go ahead.

Johnson won the top job in July by staking his career on getting Brexit done by Oct. 31, though in the letter he makes clear he is ready to scrap his deadline. Last month, he said **he would rather be "dead in a ditch" than ask for a delay.**

But several of his aides think he can weather any criticism for failing to meet the deadline at an election by arguing that he was thwarted by lawmakers, doubling down on his team's narrative of **pitting the "people versus the parliament."**

At a meeting of his political cabinet of top ministers, some media reported that there was disagreement over whether the government should try for an early election, fearing that going to the polls before Brexit was settled might damage the governing Conservatives.

But Johnson seems to still hold out hope of securing a deal with Brussels, offering parliament until Nov. 6 to ratify an agreement he settled with the EU last week.

"This means that we could get Brexit done before the election on 12 December, if MPs choose to do so."

Labour has long said it cannot back an election until a so-called no deal Brexit is off the table. But if the EU grants an extension until the end of January, that would appear to remove the threat of Johnson taking Britain out of the bloc without an agreement.

By proposing to dissolve parliament on Nov. 6, that would also be beyond the current Oct. 31 deadline.

Leave with Johnson's deal

Earlier, a senior Downing Street source said Britain would ultimately leave the EU with Johnson's deal despite the likely additional delay, with the EU considering offering London a three-month flexible Brexit extension.

"This ends with us leaving with the PM's deal," the Downing Street source said on condition of anonymity. "We will leave with a deal, with the PM's deal."

All eyes are now on not whether, but by how long, the EU decides to extend the Brexit process: Berlin supports a three-month delay, while Paris is pushing for a shorter one.

While both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron appear to be fatigued by Brexit, they fear a no-deal exit that would almost certainly hurt global growth, roil financial markets and create a potentially deeper EU crisis.

To offer Britain a long extension would take the pressure off British lawmakers to approve Johnson's deal and open up possibilities such as a referendum on it. A short extension might focus minds in the British parliament.

Brexit was initially supposed to have taken place on March 29 but Johnson's predecessor Theresa May was forced to delay twice - first to April 12 and then to Oct. 31 - as parliament defeated her Brexit deal by margins of between 58 and 230 votes earlier this year.

Johnson was forced by parliament on Saturday to send a letter to European Council President Donald Tusk requesting a delay until Jan. 31. He did so reluctantly, sending an unsigned photocopied note, but the correspondence was accepted.

"Our policy remains that we should not delay," Johnson told parliament on Tuesday after parliament defeated his extremely tight legislative timetable for ratifying the deal he clinched in Brussels a week ago.