

The Police Don't Get It

By Dan Rabinowitz

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Details of the serious events that took place in Peki'in early yesterday morning are still not clear; at the time of this writing, some 40 people were reported as wounded in the confrontation with the police. Some of them were wounded by gunfire after several village residents were arrested on suspicion of vandalizing a cellular antenna.

Three issues raised by this incident, however, are already clear and worth stating openly. The first is that in this crisis, the problem revolves around environmental and health issues, and the ethno-national tension is a side effect. The fear of cellular antennas in Peki'in, a village whose mountainous location makes it ideal for relaying cellular signals and the site of a great many powerful antennas, has been mounting for years. Many of the village's residents are convinced that the incidence of cancer in some neighborhoods stems directly from the antennas' radiation.

It doesn't matter what specific medical data is gathered there, or what statistical measures researchers use to confirm or dismiss the connection between environmental factors and cancer. It is clear that the villagers' feelings, even if they are subjective, are part of the socio-political reality.

When such feelings are present, sending in the special forces is a mistake. People who live with a sense that their health - and their very lives - are in danger do not need a military operation. They certainly do not need one mounted by the Israel Police, which has failed countless times to communicate with Arab civilians. What is needed in Peki'in, and in every place where residents fear for their health, is an in-depth examination of the problem, basic respect for others, conversation and a determination to solve matters humanely. When we have a police force that knows how to do such things, I will eat my hat.

The second issue is the growing, destructive gap between the police's intolerable lenience for vandalism in Jewish towns, and the determination with which the police raises its iron fist in response to similar incidents in Arab towns. This biased response is part of the problem, not part of the solution. It is this bias that labels every Arab step as ethno-national and instantly inflames the situation. There is no clearer example of this than what happened in Peki'in. The police's excessively violent reaction is liable to turn this relatively quiet village,

which enjoys excellent inter-ethnic relations among residents and good relations with the state, into a hotbed of tension and hostility.

The third issue is that the Peki'in incident is one more proof, for anyone who needs it, that environmental questions long ago ceased being only a hobby for those who had already solved their burning existential problems, and suddenly had time to attend to aesthetics and cleanliness. Around the world, we are seeing how populations outside the middle class in industrialized countries, that until now were not identified with environmental issues, are clearly pointing to what endangers them. The air people breathe, the water they drink, the pollutants that endanger them, proper safety precautions and minimal health conditions have become burning socio-political concerns that emphasize the disparities between populations. This concern finds global expression in the fateful dispute over greenhouse gas emissions and the future of the atmosphere, and has multiple local manifestations, such as the developments in Peki'in.

The event that preceded the October 2000 riots in the Israeli Arab sector was the confrontation that erupted six months earlier at the University of Haifa, over the right to demonstrate. Now the whole government must pull together, along with the local authorities, the political system and the entire public, to ensure that the current conflict, over people's right to health and a long life in their own home, does not escalate into a widespread, bloody confrontation.

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