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Israel Says African Migrants Pose Growing Threat

By Robert Berger

JERUSALEM - There is growing concern in Israel about an influx of tens of thousands of migrants from Africa.

The flood of illegal African migrants entering Israel topped the agenda at the weekly Cabinet meeting in Jerusalem.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned the migrants are “threatening the fabric of Israeli society, its national security and its national identity.”

The issue has become the center of a heated national debate, after a series of violent crimes and rapes against Israelis, allegedly committed by the migrants. Residents of South Tel Aviv and other areas with a large population of impoverished Africans have demanded action from the government.

“It is terribly frightening,” a young woman told Israeli television. “I am afraid to go out at night and my parents are hysterical.”

About 60,000 Africans have poured into Israel since 2005, entering illegally from Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. While some are refugees from war-torn Sudan and Eritrea, the Israeli government says the vast majority are economic migrants seeking jobs and a higher standard of living.

Some Israeli civil-rights groups say Israel has an obligation to receive the Africans because the nation was established as a refuge for Jews in similar need after the Holocaust. But Prime Minister Netanyahu disagrees.

He warned that if Israel does not stop the influx, then “60,000 infiltrators are liable to become 600,000.”

Israeli authorities are building a fence on the Egyptian border to keep the Africans out and detention centers for the ones already here. Israel is facing a demographic threat from a growing Palestinian population, and it fears that the Africans are posing a further threat to the Jewish character of the state.