

*Owners of illegal houses in Almanzora ask the Junta to hurry up*

The British community claims that homeowners were swindled

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"Many of us will be dead before the situation of our homes is resolved," says Mike Phillips, owner of one of the 5000 buildings classed as 'fuera de ordenacion' in the Almanzora Valley, where one finds the town of Arboleas. This week its council was served with a court order looking for evidence of urban crimes.

After holidaying in Spain several times, this retired English engineer decided to fulfil his dream of living by the coast, and spent "a lifetime's savings," some 200,000 euros in the acquisition of a house in Albox, a town to which he moved with his wife five years ago.

The idyllic plan devised by this couple became a mirage in just a few months, when the businessman who sold them their house, promising that everything was legal, simply disappeared when his deception was discovered. "We have not enjoyed a single day of our retirement since then," laments Phillips, who is vice president of the association Abuse Urbanísticos Almanzora No, a collective that unites 400 of the thousands of British citizens who have also been affected by the development fever that has spread in this remote and quiet area over the last decade.

The allegations of alleged illegal construction of housing in greenfield sites in various municipalities in the area-including Albox, Partalao, Arboleas or Zurgena - began to proliferate three years ago. The mayor of Zurgena and the councilman for Urban Development, both from the Partido Andalucista were detained for alleged planning corruption in April 2008.

The British group, which estimates that the courts in Huércal-Overa are currently investigating the situation of up to 2,000 properties, began to organize, sending their complaints to the European Parliament and mobilizing to demand solutions to urban chaos that has also condemned hundreds of householders to live without electricity or water. This happened to Charles and Geraldine Day, a married couple living in a rural area of Albox, who consider that their "most basic rights" have been "trampled" since they moved to Almería in 2006.

To try to remedy this situation, which became especially complex after the demolition of a house belonging to a British couple in Vera in January 2008, in September of that year the Junta and the municipalities of Zurgena, Albox, Cantoria, Arboleas, Partalao, Lubrín and Albánchez all agreed to cooperate in developing inspection plans to identify the number of illegal houses and the exact location of each.

This initiative, still unfinished, will (according to early estimates of the delegate for Housing and Planning, Juan Caparros ) regularise 95% of these buildings – an initiative that has not escaped the suspicion of the British community. This is still far from the solution for houses constructed outside the law that both the owners and Ecologists in Action estimate to be more than 10,000. Justice is taking its course, with multiple open proceedings relating to urban crimes committed in the area.

