

# Israel to build thousands more settler homes in West Bank

**Rick Kelly****24 March 2005**

On Monday, the Israeli government announced the expansion of the Maaleh Adumim settlement, east of Jerusalem. With 30,000 residents, the settlement is the single largest in the Occupied Territories. The government of Ariel Sharon recently confirmed that its separation barrier will be constructed around the area.

The Israeli Defence Ministry has now approved the establishment of two new neighbourhoods, in order to have an unbroken populated corridor connecting Jerusalem and the settlement. According to *Haaretz* newspaper, the plan will see the construction of at least 3,500 new houses on occupied Palestinian land.

The new development will consolidate Israel's incursion into the West Bank, and will cut off any direct route between the southern Palestinian cities of Bethlehem and Hebron and those in the north, such as Ramallah and Nablus.

In recent months, a growing body of evidence has emerged that illegal settlement construction was being stepped up, with the backing of the government. Aerial photography by the Israeli Defence Ministry showed extensive construction throughout the West Bank between mid-2004, when the first round of photographs was taken, and early 2005.

On March 9, officials released a report into the expansion of settlements prepared by former Israeli state prosecutor Talia Sasson. The report found that successive Israeli governments secretly and illegally funded and assisted the settlers. The Defence Ministry acceded to Sasson's demand for a new photographic study of the settlements. No photographic record had been kept for the previous five years.

Monday's announcement confirms that behind the Likud-Labour government's declarations in favour of moving the "peace process" forward by agreeing to remove a small number of settlements from the Gaza

Strip, the Israeli commitment to the consolidation and expansion of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem remains unshaken. Every opportunity is taken to increase the 400,000-strong force of settlers in these areas so as ultimately to permanently annex them to a Greater Israel.

The fanatical settlers have found themselves in conflict with Prime Minister Sharon over his proposed Gaza pullout, but they still function as an advance guard in implementing his broader expansionist strategy. The criminality of the Sharon government's policies finds a reflection in the actions of the settlers themselves.

There have been a number of attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank in recent weeks. On March 17, settlers in Hebron attacked a Palestinian home with hammers, destroying part of the ceiling.

The following day, religious students assaulted eight Palestinian labourers with stones and sticks, and in another incident a group of settlers hospitalised a truck driver in an attack near Nablus. On March 22, *Haaretz* reported that Zionists in the southern Mount Hebron region had attempted to poison sheep kept by neighbouring Palestinian farmers.

Sharon's latest moves, as with all of his attacks on the Palestinian people, have been facilitated by the full support of the Bush administration.

An Israeli foreign ministry spokesman defended the expansion of the Maaleh Adumim settlement, declaring, "Building in a place where there is an international consensus that it's going to stay in Israel in no way undermines the ability of the Palestinians to create a viable, contiguous Palestinian state."

In reality, there is no international consensus that Israel has the right to annex any part of Palestinian territory. The Maaleh Adumim development

contravenes international law and numerous United Nations resolutions prohibiting Israeli expansion on Palestinian land. The Bush administration is the only major power that has lined up behind Israel on this question.

The so-called “Road Map” for peace in the Middle East that is meant to constitute the basis for a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians formally calls for an end to settlement activity. But the document endorsed by the US, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia is a dead letter as far as Washington is concerned. President George Bush has stated that any final settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians will have to take the “realities on the ground” into account—a position that, in effect, gives Israel a green light for continued aggressive expansion.

Israel understands that Washington’s periodic calls for the Zionist state to abide by its various obligations are issued solely out of diplomatic necessity, and are not to be taken seriously. In response to the latest developments, a US State Department spokesman called for an end to settlement activity, as required under the Road Map, but refused to comment specifically on the Maaleh Adumim expansion, saying that the US was “seeking clarification” from the Israelis.

The Road Map not only calls for the cessation of Israeli settlement expansion, but holds out the promise of a contiguous Palestinian state. The expanded Maaleh Adumim settlement makes a mockery of this.

The route of Israel’s so-called “security wall” redraws the borders of the West Bank so that the territory resembles an hourglass, with Palestinian movement between the north and south entirely at the discretion of the Israeli security forces. Whatever is left as the basis of a Palestinian state will be divided into small enclaves surrounded on all sides by Israeli troops and heavily fortified borders. These areas will resemble Bantustan-style ghettos in which the inhabitants are policed by a Palestinian regime subordinate to Washington and Tel Aviv.

The latest developments underscore the major motivation behind the Sharon government’s plans for withdrawal from Gaza—namely, the creation of a diplomatic cover behind which it can seize yet more Palestinian territory. Sharon is a shrewd enough

politician to understand that the formation of a Greater Israel—which has always been his ultimate goal—requires some degree of tactical manoeuvring.

The Israeli prime minister concluded that the densely populated Gaza was never a viable area for Israeli expansion. By removing just 9,000 settlers from that region, Sharon hopes to ensure that Gaza’s 1.3 million Palestinians, cut off from Israel by the wall, can be internally policed by the Palestinian Authority, while Gaza’s outer borders are patrolled by Egypt. Israel will continue to control Gaza’s airspace, and internal land and sea borders.

Sharon’s “unilateral disengagement” scheme—the name given to the Gaza withdrawal and the construction of the West Bank wall—was initially proposed on the grounds that Israel had no “partner in peace” with whom it could negotiate. This pretext has been removed since the election of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas following Yasser Arafat’s death.

Abbas has acceded to virtually every Israeli and US demand, but Sharon’s stance remains unaltered. The Israeli government has steadfastly refused to negotiate with the Palestinian Authority, and insists that the only issue open for discussion is how Abbas can most effectively suppress any resistance to the occupation.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat has complained that Israel’s plans sabotage “all efforts seeking to get the peace process back on track...The Israeli government wants to determine Jerusalem’s fate by presenting the settlements and wall as a fait accompli.”

Yet the PA will do nothing that threatens to bring it into political conflict with Washington. Instead, Erekat went through the motions once again of appealing to Bush for aid, asking, “What happened to the two-state vision and how can we have peace while settlements and the wall continue to be built?”



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