

Reports: Netanyahu Quietly Curbs Settlement Expansion

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has quietly curbed new building projects in Jewish settlements, an Israeli watchdog group and media reports said on Tuesday, in an apparent bid to help U.S. efforts to revive peace talks with the Palestinians.

"We see there have been no new construction tenders issued for the West Bank since President Barack Obama visited (in March)," Yariv Oppenheimer, head of Peace Now, which monitors settlement activity in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, told Reuters after assessing the group's data.

Israeli Army Radio reported that Netanyahu had met Housing Minister Uri Ariel to order a freeze in tenders for new housing projects in settlements in the West Bank, effectively delaying the construction of hundreds of homes.

The Haaretz newspaper, quoting unidentified senior officials, said Netanyahu had promised U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that he would refrain until mid-June from publishing new tenders in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, areas that Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war.

In Jerusalem, a spokesman for Netanyahu, who is visiting China, had no immediate comment. Kerry is engaged in a fresh U.S. diplomatic campaign to revive peace talks, which collapsed in 2010 over Israel's continued expansion of settlements.

Nabil Abu Rdaineh, a spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, responded cautiously to the reports.

"A freeze in settlement construction within the 1967 borders and especially Jerusalem are the basis of starting any genuine and serious negotiations," he said. "We must hear Israel state

this policy officially.”

Ariel, interviewed on Army Radio, declined to confirm or deny that a freeze was in place.

“I am not commenting. A minister sits with his prime minister. If they want to go public, they have ways to go public. If they want for it stay between them, it will stay between them,” Ariel said.

Jewish Home Party

Ariel was pressed to say whether he was unhappy with the freeze order. “You can understand whatever you want,” he replied.

Ariel is a member of the far-right Jewish Home party, whose leader, Naftali Bennett, has advocated annexing parts of the West Bank.

The Palestinians, who demand a halt to settlement activity as a condition for returning to peace negotiations, want to establish a functioning state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

In an apparent effort to give U.S. diplomacy a chance, the Palestinians have not applied in recent months to join any world organizations after the de facto recognition of Palestinian statehood at the United Nations last November.

After the U.N. vote, which was opposed by Israel and the United States, Netanyahu announced plans to build 3,000 more settler homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

But during his visit to Israel and the West Bank, Obama reiterated U.S. displeasure, saying that continued settlement activity was “counterproductive to the cause of peace.”

Peace Now said it would be premature to describe the decision not to issue new tenders as a settlement freeze.

“The construction on the ground continues at the same pace, and plans continue to be promoted,” it said. Between a general election on January 22 and the swearing-in of Netanyahu’s new government on March 18, approval was given for 1,506 dwellings to be built in West Bank settlements, Peace Now said.

A 10-month moratorium on housing starts in settlements in 2009 led to a brief resumption of peace talks. Netanyahu says the Palestinians should now return to negotiations unconditionally, a position echoed by Washington.

The settlements that Israel has built in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are considered illegal by most countries. Israel cites historical and biblical links to the areas, where about 500,000 Israelis now live alongside 2.5 million Palestinians.

(Additional reporting by Ari Rabinovitch in Jerusalem and Noah Browning in Ramallah; Editing by Kevin Liffey)