

Stop Settlement Construction

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Ha'aretz Editorial Staff

As expected, sharp international condemnation rained down upon the government of Israel because of its intention to expand settlements in the territories. The criticism followed the announcement by Housing Minister Natan Sharansky of plans to build 700 new homes in settlements, and the publication of plans for further construction in the territories. The U.S. government termed the expansion plans "provocative" and demanded they be stopped, fearing they will lead to a further escalation in the region. France said that Israel has "lost its direction since Sharon came to power." Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak expressed deep concern in a telephone conversation with Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. For their part, the Palestinians saw the announcement of the expansion plans as further confirmation of their suspicions, that the new government of Israel intends to broaden the occupation rather than seek accommodation and reconciliation.

Israel's official explanations did not satisfy anyone. The Prime Minister's Office said the expansion was in line with the coalition's guidelines, according to which no new settlements would be built. On the other hand, the settlements would be permitted to expand according to their natural growth. But the decision appears to be camouflaging a general trend to expand the hold of the settlers on the territories. As was the case with previous governments, there is an exaggerated interpretation and use of the element of natural growth.

Apparently, the available housing in the settlements is sufficient to meet the needs of natural growth without the need for any sort of new construction, according to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics. Last September, the number of homes under construction in the settlements stood at 6,100 and the number of empty, available homes was about 3,700. The needs to meet natural growth in the settlements, estimated over the next two year period, is less than 9,000 homes in total. In 2000, 1,943 homes were under construction in the settlements, the largest number since 1992, when Ariel Sharon served as Minister of Housing and Construction.

There is no need for statistics and calculations comprehend the implications of any further construction in the settlements. For the Palestinians, this is a challenge that justifies terrorist actions and violence. Sharansky's announcement came at a particularly inopportune time, following the resumption of the talks for security cooperation between the two sides. It seems that the proposal to expand the settlements is being presented to the Palestinians also as a response to the unending shooting on their part. However, the military measures which are being extensively used are supposed to serve this end. It makes no sense at this time to drag the issue of the settlements into the desperate effort to minimize the violence.

The settlements were born in political sin, in governments giving in to pressures from the right. They have become an obstacle to peace. In recent years it has become clear that a majority of Israelis are willing to give up most of the settlements in the territories in return for a peace accord. Even now, when the stock of peace is at a nadir, the government's decision to expand the settlements is an act of irresponsibility.

A government which seeks to argue that its goal is to reach a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians through peaceful means, and is trying at this stage to bring about an end to the violence and terrorism, must announce an end to construction in the settlements.