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Gaza pullout diverting media gaze

By Lawrence Smallman

Wednesday 11 May 2005, 10:02 Makka Time, 7:02 GMT

A top Palestinian official has told Aljazeera.net that while the world is focusing on the withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces from Gaza, Tel Aviv has strengthened its grasp on the West Bank.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saib Uraiqat told Aljazeera.net on Wednesday Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government was forging ahead with land confiscations, illegal settlement expansion and barrier building.

He said Tel Aviv's policies were not only prejudicing any final peace agreement, but were also turning the West Bank into a series of walled ghettos that could never be part of a contiguous Palestinian state.

"The Gaza withdrawal is pre-occupying the media. Yes, they (Israeli soldiers) are leaving Gaza but they are also taking tracts of land in the West Bank. Israeli spokesmen stress they are 'only' taking 8% when we should be holding peace negotiations," Uraiqat said.

In February, Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery also



Uraiqat says Palestinians are being divided up into ghettos

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"The Gaza

alluded to the "only 8%" remark, observing that if Mexico were to annex 8% of the US, it could wall off the whole of Texas.

Uraiqat added that he did not fear that the West Bank would be virtually annexed at some point in the future, because he said it was already happening now.

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Saib Uraiqat,
chief Palestinian
negotiator

"I am seeing our population centres split up and this illegal wall continue to be constructed. Illegal settlements - and the security roads and soldiers they inevitably bring with them - are effectively cutting the West Bank away from Jerusalem.

"Palestinians will all soon be living in a walled prison," Uraiqat added.

Israeli comment

Uraiqat's remarks come in reaction to Sharon's comments on Tuesday.

The Israeli prime minister said that despite the impending withdrawal of occupation troops from Gaza, Israel had fulfilled a "significant part of its dream" in the West Bank.

Speaking to participants of the International Bible Quiz in Jerusalem, Sharon affirmed Tel Aviv's resolve to maintain control over large blocs of West Bank settlements.

"Settlement blocs will be part of the state of Israel and contiguous with Israel," Sharon said on Tuesday.

"Although the settlement enterprise is being rolled back in Gaza, it has allowed Israel to fulfil



Sharon: Israel is fulfilling its dream for the West Bank



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a very significant part of its dream."

He also stressed that Washington supported Israel's policy on holding on to West Bank settlement blocs under a final peace accord.

Latest developments

In a related development, Israeli army bulldozers removed some of the cement barriers that occupation forces had previously set up on the main road linking the West Bank's largest city, Nablus, with the nearby town of Jenin to the west and the Jordan Valley to the east.

Lieutenant-Colonel Erez Weiner, the army's chief of operations in the West Bank, said the army has scaled back its activities "dramatically" throughout the area since the February ceasefire went into effect.

Nevertheless, he said troops were imposing a blanket closure of the West Bank and Gaza, barring Palestinians from entering Israel until Saturday night.

The order came as Israel began its annual Memorial Day for victims of fighting with the Palestinians, which is followed on Thursday by Independence Day celebrations.

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