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## Israel sets West Bank settlement expansion

04 Aug 2005 08:54:39 GMT

Source: Reuters

JERUSALEM, Aug 4 (Reuters) - Israel revealed plans on Thursday to build 72 housing units in a Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank, despite a call by a U.S.-backed peace "road map" for a halt to settlement expansion.

A spokesman for Israel's Housing Ministry, which invited bids for the project in a newspaper notice, said construction in the ultra-Orthodox settlement of Betar Ilit, near the Palestinian city of Bethlehem, could start within a year.

"This is a provocation not only to the Palestinian people but also to the international community," said Palestinian Planning Minister Ghassan al-Khattib.

Peace Now, the Israeli settler watchdog group, said the new project came in addition to a plan announced last year to build 600 housing units at Betar Ilit.

"It means that the policy of building in the territories continues despite the clear commitment in the road map not to build there," Yariv Oppenheimer, a Peace Now spokesman said.

The peace plan called on Israel to freeze "all settlement activity including natural growth of settlements". Israel says expansion of existing settlements is necessary to meet the needs of their growing populations.

Commenting on the 72-unit project, a Housing Ministry spokesman said: "It is a natural development of plans that were approved in the past within the existing borders of Betar Ilit."

Israel has invited bids for about 235 housing units in

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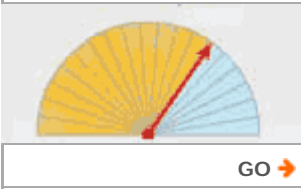
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West Bank settlements in the first half of this year compared with some 960 for the same period in 2004, Peace Now said. About 200,000 Jewish settlers live amidst 2.4 million Palestinians in more than 120 settlements in the West Bank, land the Palestinians seek along with the Gaza Strip for a future independent state.

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Israel intends to begin evacuating all 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four in the northern West Bank on Aug. 17 under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to "disengage" from areas he says have little security value for the Jewish state.

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The World Court has called the settlements illegal. Israel disputes this. The United States, citing "existing major Israeli population centres" in occupied territory, has said it would be unrealistic to expect Israel to return all of the land it captured in the 1967 Middle East war under a final peace treaty.

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