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Israel and
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Sharon pledges to expand in West Bank

Chris McGreal in Netzarim

Tuesday August 23, 2005

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As Israeli forces removed residents from the last Jewish settlement still to be cleared in the Gaza Strip yesterday, Ariel Sharon sought to win back support from the Israeli right by promising continued expansion of Israel's West Bank colonies and no more unilateral pullouts.

The prime minister's remarks came as troops cleared Netzarim settlement, which Mr Sharon famously declared three years ago was as much part of Israel as Tel Aviv.

Yesterday, security forces removed the settlement's 120 families amid tears and fury but no physical resistance, completing the evacuation of all 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip in less than a week. The military originally said it would take three times as long.

Embittered Netzarim residents directed their ire at Mr Sharon for going back on his word. In an attempt to reassure the Israeli right, the prime minister told the Jerusalem Post that he will continue expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which are home to about 400,000 people. "There will be building in the settlement blocks," he said. "Each government since 1967, right, left and national unity, has seen strategic importance in specific areas [in the occupied territories] I will build."

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The newspaper said Mr Sharon specifically mentioned further construction in Ma'ale Adumim settlement, designed to link it to Jerusalem despite Washington's objections. He said that Ariel settlement, in the heart of the West Bank, would be annexed as "a part of Israel for ever". The prime minister also said there would be no further unilateral withdrawals.

Mr Sharon's remarks come as he faces a serious challenge to his leadership of the Likud party from Binyamin Netanyahu, an opponent of the Gaza withdrawal, in the run-up to next year's general election.

Netzarim is one of the settlements most hated by the Palestinians. The tiny enclave, just south of Gaza city, severed the main road running the length of the Gaza Strip, forcing Palestinians on to a coastal path under the guns of the Israeli military watchtowers. More than 100 Palestinians were killed from the towers or army posts in the settlement, including 17 aged 15 years or younger.

Netzarim swallowed up swaths of Arab agricultural land and was responsible for the demolition of scores of Palestinian homes in the name of security for the settlers. The colony was also controversial among Israelis. Seventeen soldiers have been killed in recent years defending just a few hundred residents, a price many Israelis felt was too high.

But Shlomit Ziv, a teacher and mother of eight children who has lived in the settlement for 13 years, says not. "Are we to say that we should not defend a part of Israel because soldiers are killed?" she said. "No one is happy to be living under terror but the value of the place is worth it. The people of Netzarim suffered from terror because we believed that even if it's hard, that's what God wants."

The police commander overseeing yesterday's pullout, Brigadier General Hagai

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Dotan, saw it differently.

"It's so far away and they need the army to protect them. It's a burden on the army. There is a big disagreement in Israel about this place. Do we really need the place and so many soldiers to guard it?" he said. "Personally I think [the withdrawal] is a victory for democracy in Israel."

As the pullout from Netzarim began yesterday, one Israeli family hung a Palestinian crest on its door under a sign: "Soldiers of Zion, you are creating a Palestinian country."

Netzarim's residents went quietly after a service of mourning in the synagogue. They boarded buses to travel to Jerusalem to pray before moving to temporary accommodation in the student dorms of Ariel settlement's college.

Last night, 40,000 Hamas supporters celebrated the withdrawal at a rally in Gaza city, and the militant group vowed to continue fighting Israel until it pulls out of all occupied territory. Ismail Haniyah, a Hamas leader, told the crowd: "Gaza will be the first brick in the building of the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital."

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