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Israel approves W Bank settlement

Israel has approved the construction of a new settlement in the occupied West Bank, Israeli officials have said.



The defence ministry said 30 houses would be built in the settlement for families moved from the Gaza Strip.

It marks the first time since 1992 that Israel has approved a new settlement, rather than expanding existing ones, an Israeli settlement watchdog said.

Settlements in the West Bank are illegal under international law, although Israel rejects this.

Palestinian condemnation

The construction of the Maskiot settlement in the West Bank's northern Jordan Valley will begin within weeks, Israeli officials said.

It will house families who were moved from the Gaza Strip when Israeli troops and settlers left in 2005, they said.

Israel's Peace Now group - whose members monitor Israeli settlements in the West Bank - said it would be the first such settlement since 1992.

The Israeli decision was denounced by Palestinian officials, who said it violated the US-backed "road map" peace plan for the region.

"We condemn this act and this decision especially as it comes after the Israeli side committed itself to stop all unilateral actions," Saeb Erekat, an aide to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, told AFP news agency.

Under the road map, Israel committed to freezing all settlement expansion in the occupied territories, while the Palestinians pledged to crack down on militants.

There are approximately 450,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

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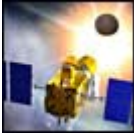
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