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Israel Authorizes 455 New Settlement Units

by **Agence France-Presse**

JERUSALEM - Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak has authorized the construction of more than 450 new housing units in settlements in the occupied West Bank, his ministry said in a statement on Monday.

"Defense Minister Ehud Barak has authorized the construction of 455 housing units in settlement blocs" in the occupied West Bank, it said after an earlier statement that he had approved 366 and would later approve more units to bring the total to 450.

The move -- which comes just days ahead of a planned visit to the region by US Middle East envoy George Mitchell -- is likely to spark further criticism from the Palestinians, the United States and Europe, which have already warned that it could endanger a resumption of peace talks with the Palestinians.

Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he would approve a burst of settlement construction before considering a US-demanded halt, in a move that analysts say is aimed at appeasing pressure from the right-wing of his hawkish Likud party.

Washington has for months pushed Israel to freeze all settlement activity and for Arab states to take steps towards normalizing relations with it in order to revive Middle East peace talks suspended late last year over Israel's war on the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has blasted the plans to build-and-halt as unacceptable, and warned that if Israel goes ahead there will be no point in holding a three-way meeting between him, Netanyahu and Obama on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly later this month.

"We will not go back to the negotiating table before a halt to the settlement building," Abbas's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP on Monday in Saudi Arabia where the president is holding talks.

Amid media speculation that some Arab states may answer Obama's call and agree to normalization steps with Israel, such as the issuing of visas, Abbas called "for a unified Arab stance in face of Israel."

Construction within Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank -- considered illegal by the international community and one of the thorniest issues in the decades-old Middle East conflict -- requires the go-ahead of the defence minister.

According to Israeli media, Netanyahu is mulling agreeing to what his allies said would be an "easing" of settlement construction, but any moratorium would exclude some 2,500 homes already being built in the West Bank, as well as any building in annexed east Jerusalem.

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