



## Netanyahu to Approve West Bank Homes Prior to Freeze (Update3)

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By Calev Ben-David



Sept. 4 (Bloomberg) -- Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** will approve building thousands of new homes in West Bank settlements next week prior to freezing construction there, said a senior government official.

Israel will only then agree to a temporary halt to settlement construction if Arab states will reciprocate with steps to normalize diplomatic relations, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak on record.

The approval for the building, first reported in the **Haaretz** newspaper, would go beyond the 2,500 homes in the West Bank already approved or under construction, the official said.

Israel's reported plan drew a sharp rebuke from the U.S.

"The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued settlement expansion and we urge that it stop," President **Barack Obama's** press secretary, **Robert Gibbs**, said in a statement. "Continued settlement activity is inconsistent with Israel's commitment" under the road map toward a Middle East peace.

The U.S. government has been pressing Israel to declare a complete freeze on settlement construction as a precursor to a renewal of peace talks with the Palestinians. Netanyahu has been caught between U.S. demands and pressure from within his own Likud party to expand the settlements.

### European Reaction

European Union foreign ministers today also stepped up the pressure on Israel to halt the settlements, calling a freeze the only way to get peace talks back on track.

"Freezing the settlements is a decisive element for restarting the peace process," French Foreign Minister **Bernard Kouchner** told reporters at an EU meeting in Stockholm.

Netanyahu said last week that it was possible a formula would be reached to renew talks with the Palestinians by the time the United Nations General Assembly meets later this month in New York. That would allow for Netanyahu's first meeting with Palestinian Authority President **Mahmoud Abbas** since taking office in March. Both are scheduled to attend the UN meeting.

Israeli President **Shimon Peres**, speaking to reporters at a conference in Cernobbio, Italy, today, said there was a "fair chance" Israeli-Palestinian talks could resume this month.

Amre Moussa, secretary general of the Arab League, was less optimistic. "As I understand from reading the newspapers and the media today, the Israeli position is far from satisfactory and it cannot really help."

"Such a situation, such a proposal by the Israelis, would destroy the peace prospects entirely," Moussa told Bloomberg today at the conference in Cernobbio.

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