

US vetoes UN draft condemning Israeli settlements

** All other 14 UNSC members vote 'yes'*

** More than 100 states co-sponsored resolution*

** Britain, France, Germany condemn Israeli settlements as 'illegal'*

UNITED NATIONS: The United States has vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements on Palestinian land after the Palestinians refused a compromise offer from Washington.

UN diplomats say the Palestinian Authority, which has been trying to defend itself against critics who accuse it of caving in to the Americans and Israelis during peace talks, was eager to show that it can stand up to Washington.

The other 14 Security Council members voted in favor of the draft resolution. But the United States, as one of the five permanent council members with the power to block any action by the Security Council, voted against it and struck it down.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice told council members that the veto "should not be misunderstood to mean we support settlement activity." The US position is that continued Israeli settlements lack legitimacy, she said. But Rice said the draft "risks hardening the position of both sides" and reiterated the US view that settlements and other contentious issues should be resolved in direct Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

The resolution described the settlements as "illegal" and urged the Jewish state to "immediately and completely" halt all settlement activities. Diplomats said the views contained in the resolution, which would have been legally binding had it passed, are generally supported by the Obama administration.

However, they said, the United States refuses to allow the Security Council to intervene with binding resolutions on issues it feels belongs to direct peace talks. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a statement Israel "deeply appreciates" the US decision to veto the resolution.

British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant, speaking on behalf of Britain, France and Germany, condemned Israeli settlements as "illegal under international law." He added that the European Union's three biggest nations hope that an independent state of Palestine will join the United Nations as a new member state by September 2011. Several EU nations, including Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden, were among the resolution's more than 100 co-sponsors.

The US move was welcomed by American pro-Israel groups, some of which have previously criticised President Barack Obama's administration for what they see as its record of lukewarm support for Israel. reuters

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