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Israel's words and actions on settlements contradictory Israeli-US settlement freeze talks hit a dead end



Tuesday's settlement talks only yielded vague promises of finding "solutions"

CAIRO (Marwa Awad)

Israel held firm once more against a total settlement freeze in defiance of international protocols and past peace agreements as talks on Tuesday between its Defense Minister Ehud Barak and United States envoy George Mitchell appeared to be at an impasse.

A public rift between Washington and Tel Aviv was starkly revealed as Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak refused to budge on freezing settlement growth in the West Bank and asserted the Jewish state's right to what it calls "natural growth."

The talks came after a meeting scheduled last week between the two was cancelled, in what was seen as an Israeli-U.S. tension.

Impasse

The Obama administration has repeatedly demanded that Israel stops all settlement activity in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and Palestinians have refused to return to peace talks with Israel without a settlement freeze.

Despite the obvious lack of any resolution, Barak denied there was an impasse and described the Israeli-U.S. dialogue as "positive," although he said Israel could not even commit to a temporary three to six month settlement freeze aimed at kickstarting dialogue between Palestine and Israel.

"I don't think we are stuck," Barak said after the meeting. But a joint statement did little to pinpoint an outcome for one of the most contentious issues in the tortured Middle East process.

"So far I don't think there is anything that suggests there a light at the end of the tunnel," Emad Gad, an

expert on Israeli-Palestinian conflict at Egypt's Ahram Center told Al Arabiya.

Settlement saga

Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are one of the biggest obstacles in the peace process because more than half a million Jewish settlers live their but Palestinians and international law do not recognize the legality of the post-1967 land-grab.

"The biggest obstacle today is the settlements," Hagit Ofran of the Israeli anti-settlement watchdog group PeaceNOW told Al Arabiya. "There is no land left for Palestinians."

"We believe it is easier for the government of Israel to stop settlement activities than trying to find excuses for their continuation," Ophran stated.

Ophran added Israel's claims of "natural growth" are bogus given that 40 percent of the settler increase is due to immigration to settlements either from within Israel or abroad.

"Natural growth in the settlements is not simply a matter of births from within but includes continuous flow of immigrants," Ophran explained.

Settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem have continued to expand at a rate higher than the population growth inside Israel. Some 180,000 additional Jews have been permitted to settle inside Israel's Arab sector in East Jerusalem.

Israel is officially part of a series of agreements that require halting settlements, including the Quartet's U.S.-sponsored "road map" to peace which calls for a freeze "of all settlement activity" and dismantling outposts set up since 2001.

Ongoing settlement activity makes it impossible for the 2.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and 1.5 million in Gaza to find sufficient land for natural growth.

Last week Prime Minister Netanyahu endorsed the establishment of a Palestinian state but stripped of arms, land and air sovereignty and without the return of the seven million Palestinians in exile, a condition that the Islamist movement Hamas likened to a neutered state.

"This is not a state in the real sense of a people in control of their own affairs and lives," Yusuf Rizqa, Ismail Haniya's advisor told Al Arabiya. "They simply want Palestinians to get a flag and an anthem."