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ISRAEL: Pressure for Settlements

Leaders of the Israeli radical nationalist Gush Emunim organization, which is dedicated to settling more Jews on the occupied West Bank, are threatening to "create new facts" by establishing unsanctioned new settlements there unless the government officially approves additional settlements soon. Prime Minister Begin reportedly has not made up his mind on the settlements issue, although he probably would prefer to defer any action in order to avoid jeopardizing peace negotiations and worsening relations with the US. []

Begin's room for maneuvering has decreased in the face of growing pressure from key hardliners in the ruling coalition who are deeply troubled by the implications of the West Bank autonomy plan and anxious to reaffirm Israel's right to settle there. Many in the coalition, as well as much of the public, moreover, are outraged over what they perceive to be unfair US pressure in the peace negotiations and probably are in a mood to support independent Gush action if Begin holds back on approving new settlements. []

The Gush secretariat, at a weekend meeting, threatened to try to establish new settlements near Nabulus, the largest Arab town on the West Bank, and near Jericho. Israeli troops forcibly evicted Gush squatters from the Nabulus site in September and a year earlier turned back a Gush cadre near Jericho. According to press reports, Israeli security forces have again taken up positions along key roads into the West Bank to head off any wild-cat Gush settlement attempt. []

Begin thus far has limited himself to reiterating that the government remains solely responsible for new settlements. He recognizes the sensitivity of the issue and wants to avoid needlessly antagonizing the US. Within the context of Israeli politics and his own attachment to the West Bank, Begin, since becoming Prime Minister, usually has sought to mollify the Gush and its coalition supporters with minimal concessions on settlements issues. []

Finance Minister Ehrlich, along with others in his Liberal wing of Begin's dominant Likud bloc, and Defense

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Minister Weizman are also sensitive to the negative impact on the peace process of new Jewish settlements. But they are currently on the defensive in the face of strong pressure for new settlements from hardliners in Begin's Herut faction of Likud as well as the National Religious Party, Likud's indispensable ally in the governing coalition. [redacted]

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