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Sent: Sunday, October 3, 2010 8:17 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: (AP) Peace talks come and go, but a settlement grows

From: Simmons, Krista M
To: NEWS-Mahogany; NEWS-NEA
Cc: SES-O_Shift-I; SES-O_OS
Sent: Sun Oct 03 00:16:50 2010
Subject: (AP) Peace talks come and go, but a settlement grows

REVAVA (AP) - The American president was pushing hard for a Mideast peace agreement when six Jewish families arrived on this West Bank hilltop early one morning with cribs, refrigerators, Israeli flags and flatbed trucks carrying mobile homes.

White House condemnation came quickly: "Settlements are an obstacle to peace and their continuation does not contribute to the development of a peace process which we have all been working toward."

It was April 16, 1991.

Since then peace talks have started, stopped, restarted, and now it's President Barack Obama's turn to feel frustrated. Last week Israel ended its temporary settlement freeze, Palestinians threatened to quit the talks Obama has brokered, and settlers were celebrating in Revava, where those first trailers have been replaced by red-roofed suburban homes and six families have become 250.

The story is the same across the West Bank, where settlements have evolved from tenuous Jewish footholds into a massive presence across the hilly country which Israel captured in the 1967 war and which Palestinians want for their own state.

They have grown steadily through years of international condemnation, diplomacy, periods of violence and negotiations. They have often expanded as a direct protest against negotiations and the possibility that an Israeli government might uproot them.

In 1991, when the first Bush administration was coaxing Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table, 90,300 Israelis lived in settlements across the West Bank. Today there are 300,000, and their population is growing by 5 percent a year, more than 2 1/2 times the growth rate inside Israel.

The settlements themselves, ranging from small cities to isolated enclaves, take up just one percent of the area of the West Bank, according to government maps analyzed by Israeli human rights campaigners. But their impact is much greater than that number would suggest; the settlements and their access roads form a web of Israeli control that Palestinians say rules out any chance of viable statehood.

Nowhere is the expansion, and its interplay with the politics of peacemaking, more apparent than at Revava.

When those first families arrived on this rocky hill next to the Palestinian village of Kifl Hares, President George H. W. Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, was en route to Israel on a round of shuttle diplomacy.

One settler leader, Daniella Weiss, told The Associated Press at the time that they had "hurried the decision" on Revava to undermine Baker's plans.

Government permits had been issued and the land, settlers said, had been quietly purchased from local Palestinians.

The Israeli government was led, as it is now, by the Likud Party, historically a champion of West Bank settlement, claiming the territory as part of the biblical Land of Israel promised by God and as indispensable to Israel's security.

Some ministers in the government of then-prime minister Yitzhak Shamir reacted sourly to Revava's establishment; the government was trying to mollify the U.S. and appear receptive to peace while simultaneously settling Jews in the West Bank according to its own master plan. But the balancing act was becoming increasingly precarious.

Israeli doves were furious about Revava. Lawmaker Yossi Sarid likened it to "planting a bomb aboard (Baker's) plane in order to blow up his mission."

The settlers were young couples raised in observant Jewish homes. Gideon and Miri Goldis arrived with boxes of

possessions and three children under age 3. Nineteen years later, the family lives in a neat stucco home and have nine children.

"I had the good fortune to come to a rocky, empty hilltop and start a Zionist settlement enterprise that my grandfather could only dream of. Suddenly there was another ZIP code in the post office and another place on the map," Gideon Goldis said last week.

"I don't know what Baker wanted, or what Obama wants now, or any other leader - these are secondary," he said. "What comes first is my people, their birthright and their security."

Since the Goldises arrived, six Israeli prime ministers have held peace talks with the Palestinians. Some have officially restricted settlement construction. Through all of this, Revava has kept growing.

Settlements sometimes went up with the intention of forestalling concessions and in response to international pressure, said Israeli writer Gershon Gorenberg, who has documented the history of the settlement movement.

"The red-tiled houses on the hilltops remain as monuments to the fallen peace initiatives of the past," he said in an interview.

Unlike the Likud leaders of two decades ago, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he accepts Palestinian statehood in at least part of the West Bank. But the Palestinian leadership sees settlement construction as the true litmus test of Israeli intentions, and insists the freeze must be maintained.

The settlers see themselves as the aggrieved party, at odds with the Palestinians, the White House, and often their own government. At Revava's celebrations last week, a sign with Obama's picture referenced the controversy over the planned Islamic center near Ground Zero in Manhattan, saying: "If Islam can build anywhere, why can't I?"

Gideon Goldis' father, Avraham, was a metallurgical engineer in Philadelphia before he immigrated to Israel. In 2000 he followed his son to Revava.

Beyond ideology, he said, he found a close-knit community 10 minutes' drive from central Israel. A house in Revava costs about \$270,000, he said, a fraction of the price in Israel's center.

"The Americans said, 'you're torpedoing our efforts,'" said Goldis, 73. "We say, 'we're coming to live in Israel, why can't we live wherever we want?'"

Two decades after Baker's trip, with a new push under way for a peace agreement that would require Israel to cede most or all of the West Bank, is Goldis concerned about Revava's future?

"I'm not worried at all," he said.