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- Home
- All news
- Africa
- Americas
- Asia**
- AlertNet insight
- News
- Blogs
- Pictures
- Crisis briefings
- Country statistics
- Europe
- Middle East
- Climate change
- Topics
- Aid worker tools
- For journalists
- Interactive mapping *BETA*
- Map catalogue
- News partners
- Blogger profiles
- Emails and alerts
- Job search
- Weekly quiz

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In sign of stability, Israel removes blast wall

15 Aug 2010 11:23:39 GMT

Source: Reuters

* Barrier erected in 2002 to protect settlement

* Move a sign of West Bank stability

By Tom Perry

JERUSALEM, Aug 15 (Reuters) - In a sign of improved stability in the West Bank, Israel is removing concrete blast walls put up eight years ago to shield a settlement on Jerusalem's outskirts from Palestinian gunfire and shells.

Israeli army engineers on Sunday hoisted away sections of a 3-metre (10-foot) high concrete wall in Gilo, a settlement on the southern edge of Jerusalem targeted from the nearby West Bank town of Beit Jala during a Palestinian uprising.

The uprising, or Intifada, erupted in 2000, after the collapse of peace talks and died out some five years later.

"This is the first time that we have moved such a structure from a neighbourhood that was directly hit by sniper fire and shells," Lieutenant-Colonel Avital Liebovich, a military spokeswoman, said. Settlements such as Gilo, built on Israeli-occupied land the Palestinians seek for a state, were targeted regularly during the Intifada. Suicide bombers also struck within Israel itself.

Gilo is built on land annexed by Israel to its Jerusalem municipality following a 1967 war in which it captured the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Israel's annexation of land around Jerusalem has never won international recognition.

Engineers will be removing a series of protective barriers around Gilo over the next two weeks, an engineer involved in the work said.

Speaking in February, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak said West Bank settlers felt security had never been better.

He attributed that to work by both Israeli security forces and Palestinian security forces, which have been retrained and retooled with U.S. and European financial and technical support.

Yet the stability has not been accompanied by increased optimism over the prospects for ending the six-decade old Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The United States is seeking to revive the peace process through direct negotiations. Driving past the engineers as they prepared to hoist away the concrete slabs, one Israeli motorist expressed scepticism felt by many Palestinians and Israelis.

"It's just a waste of money to take it away and put it back in two years' time," he shouted from his vehicle.

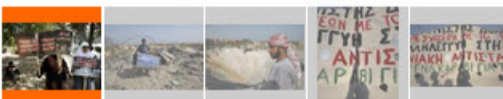
(Reporting by Tom Perry and Yehuda Gruber; editing by Michael Roddy)

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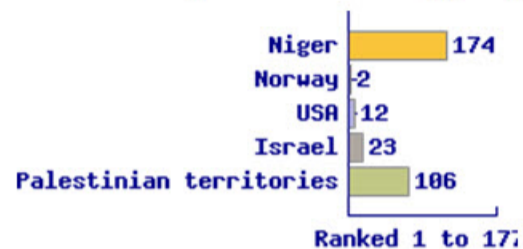
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