HE BATTALION

Thursday, April 15, 2004

# Palestinians concerned about Bush's support of Sharon pullout plan

By Mohammed Daraghmeh THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RAMALLAH, West Bank Palestinians and Israeli hardrs rejected statements by sident Bush on Wednesday gesting Israel would not e to give up some key West k settlements and ruling out right of Palestinian refugees eturn to Israel.

Bush spoke after meeting aeli Prime Minister Ariel aron in Washington, where aron presented his plan for an eli withdrawal from all of Gaza Strip, along with a aller pullback in the West

The plan faces a referendum members of Sharon's Likud y on May 2, and Sharon kers hoped Bush's statement uld persuade skeptical voters "disengagement" plan is

Likud Cabinet minister Tsipi ni, who had expressed bts about the pullout, said was somewhat reassured by sh's pledges. "I'm not ecstatshe told Israel TV. "I'm rehensive regarding the cess, but I will support it if really get these things.'

Cabinet minister Uzi Landau, ling the Likud campaign inst the Sharon initiative, d the Bush speech yielded "a harvest." He called on other kud Cabinet ministers to join drive "to stop this bad initiae," setting a planning meeting his allies for Thursday.

Hard-liners oppose evacuatsettlements in principle, and against Sharon's unilateral lback plan, calling it a ward for terrorism" that will r more violence.

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### **Bush supports Sharon's pullout plan**

President Bush endorsed Israel's Gaza pullout plan and said West Bank borders must take into account some Israeli settlements. Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia warned that will destroy peace efforts. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon wants to keep five main settlement blocs.

Settlements

Israeli Palestinian



Bush said a peace agreement must take into account realities that have developed in the decades since Israel captured the West Bank. Bush said the existence of Israeli population centers — referring to settlements — must be taken into account.

It was the first time a U.S. president had come that close to legitimizing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which were traditionally denounced as "obstacles to peace" in previous administrations.

Palestinians demand a state in all the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with the removal of all Israeli settlements.

Bush also said the problem of Palestinian refugees must be solved in the framework of a Palestinian state, rebuffing a key Palestinian demand of right of return of the refugees and their descendants to their original homes in Israel.



Minutes after Bush spoke, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia harshly criticized the president's stand. "He is the first president who has legitimized the settlements in the Palestinian territories when he said that there will be no return to the borders of 1967," Qureia said. "We as Palestinians reject that, we cannot accept that, we reject it and we refuse it."

Palestinian Cabinet minister Saeb Erekat also dismissed Bush's statement. "This is like someone giving a part of Texas' land to China," he told The Associated Press. He said that over the years, U.S. administrations have assured Palestinians that issues like borders and settlements would be handled in negotiations.

"If Israel wants to make peace, it must talk to the Palestinian leadership," Erekat said.

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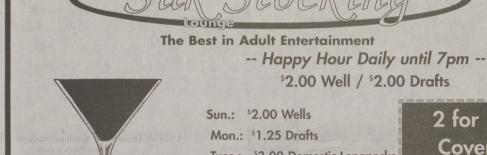
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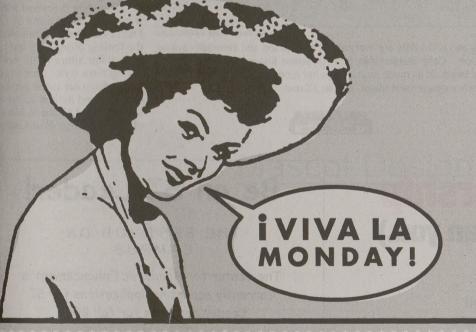
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