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Half Netanyahu's party against new freeze

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JERUSALEM (DPA) -- Around half of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 27-member parliamentary caucus have signed a petition rejecting a new temporary freeze on construction in West Bank settlements, Israeli media reported Wednesday.

The temporary freeze, proposed by the US, is aimed at enticing Palestinians back to the negotiating table, but at least four Likud Party cabinet ministers are among the signatories to the petition.

The US proposal, which reportedly is still being finalized, will see Israel receive a string of benefits, including support at the United Nations and new fighter aircraft, if it agrees to the construction moratorium.

A senior Palestinian official said that no agreement has yet been reached with Washington over the freeze.

Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations are currently in limbo after a 10-month partial Israeli construction freeze expired in September and Palestinians said they would not continue the talks unless it was renewed.

The petition, initiated by the council representing Israeli West Bank settlers, calls on Netanyahu not to renew the freeze, and demands the implementation of the decision to continue building in the West Bank once the previous moratorium ended.

Speaking after President Mahmoud Abbas met US official David Hale, a spokesman for Abbas told reporters in Ramallah that "US-Palestinian discussions will continue, but there was still no agreement."

He said that the Palestinian Authority was still waiting for the final official US position and what kind of deal the US will conclude with Israel to get the latter to freeze settlement construction

in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Israel has ruled out any freeze in East Jerusalem, which it regards as part of its "united, eternal capital."

Netanyahu is not the first Israeli prime minister, or Likud leader, to face a party revolt over plans involving Israeli settlers.

Former premier Ariel Sharon enraged the more nationalist Likud members and legislators when he proposed, and subsequently implemented, a unilateral evacuation of Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip.

Netanyahu resigned from the cabinet in opposition to the Gaza plan, whose opponents made Sharon's political life so difficult that he eventually left Likud to form a new centrist faction.

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