

Criticism dogs Olmert on U.S. visit

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert began his U.S. visit Tuesday facing criticism for blockading the Gaza Strip and building houses in occupied territory. The U.S. State Department has said Israel's continued blockage of the strip strengthens Hamas, and likely will convey its concerns to Olmert while he is in the United States, The Jerusalem Post reported. "What we're telling the Israelis is that the policy that was adopted after the summer (of June 2007) wasn't working, of really closing the borders," a State Department official said. The Israeli government also faces criticism for its plans to expand Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem, a decision that could hamper efforts to secure an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement by the end of 2008. "Our position on the settlements is that we don't believe that any more settlements should be built," White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said Monday. "And we know that it exacerbates the tension when it comes to the negotiations with the Palestinians." U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon's office also expressed concern about the decision, CNN reported. "The government of Israel's continued construction in settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory is contrary to international law and to its commitments" of working to achieve peace.

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