

US vetoes resolution on Israeli building

By Harvey Morris at the United Nations
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The Obama administration has vetoed a UN resolution that would have condemned Israeli settlement activity in occupied Palestinian territory, saying it would not contribute to a peaceful settlement in the Middle East.

The US was the only one of 15 Security Council members to oppose the resolution on Friday after President Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, appealed directly to the Palestinian leadership not to present it.

Despite the 14-1 vote, the US's power of veto, exercised for the first time by the Obama administration, blocked adoption of the resolution.

Susan Rice, US envoy to the UN, indicated that the administration had few arguments with the spirit of the draft resolution, which broadly reflected its own opposition to settlement building. "The veto should not be understood to mean we support settlement activities," she told the council, adding that continuing such activities violated Israel's international commitments.

She said, however, that the draft resolution risked hardening the positions of both sides, who would be encouraged to bring their differences to the Security Council every time they reached an impasse in the peace process. Peace could only be made between the two sides.

In an attempt to avert an embarrassing choice for the administration, Mr Obama and Mrs Clinton both telephoned Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinian Authority president, on Thursday, urging him to drop the initiative. However, the Palestinian leadership on Friday endorsed his decision to bring the resolution to a vote, even in the expectation of a US veto.

Mr Abbas was under domestic pressure not to bow to the administration, while the White House wanted to avoid pro-Israeli opinion among both parties in Congress by supporting the measure or even abstaining.

The suggestion this week that the administration might, as a compromise, put its name to a milder non-binding UN statement critical of Israel, was enough to spark fury from members of Congress.

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Republican chairwoman of the House foreign affairs committee, said: "Support for this anti-Israel statement is a major concession to enemies of the Jewish state and other free democracies. It telegraphs that the US can be bullied into abandoning critical democratic allies and core US principles."

Even among the US's closest allies, diplomats said that the US dilemma was at least partly of the administration's making. Mr Obama initially made a renewal of Middle East peace talks conditional on an Israeli settlement freeze, which had not been part of the Palestinian strategy during years of talks.

In the face of an Israeli refusal to extend a temporary freeze, the administration later dropped the condition.

The Palestinian leadership was unable to follow suit without risking a domestic backlash.