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INTERVIEW-New town aims to cement Palestinian presence

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By Mohammed Assadi

RAMALLAH, West Bank, April 9 (Reuters) - A Palestinian company will this year start building the first of several new towns in the West Bank intended to cement the Palestinian presence on land dissected by Jewish settlements.

"What we are doing is re-tying the Palestinians to their land," Bashar Masri, owner of Massar International, told Reuters in an interview this week.

Masri said he hoped that constructing new Palestinian towns in the occupied West Bank would also create jobs for thousands of Palestinians.

Close to half a million Jews live in settlements outside the populated Palestinian areas of the West Bank, captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war, including East Jerusalem. About 2.5 million Palestinians reside in the West Bank.

Israel is required to halt all settlement activity under a long-stalled "road map" peace plan, but the Jewish state says the Palestinians are failing to meet their own commitments to rein in militants bent on attacking Israelis.

To Palestinian anger, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's has decided to press ahead with building settlements, especially around Jerusalem.

Masri said the first new town, named Rawabi and comprising 5,000 housing units for some 25,000 people, would be erected on 100 hectares (247 acres) of land about 15 km (10 miles) north of Ramallah. The project is costing \$300 million, he said.

Rawabi will be near an Israeli military checkpoint and several Jewish settlements.

PROFIT AND PATRIOTISM

Masri, who has built thousands of housing units in Morocco, Jordan and Egypt, is expected to complete the first Rawabi homes, intended for newlyweds and low-income families, in 2010.

He said there was a current shortfall of about 200,000 homes for Palestinians. Masri plans two other major housing projects in the northern and southern West Bank.

Masri, who established Massar after Israel and the Palestinians signed interim peace deals in 1994, said he was driven by patriotism as well as profit to invest in the strife-torn area and hoped to create up to 10,000 new jobs.

"I do not see many international investors simply coming to Palestine to invest in this high-risk-high-reward area for the heck of it unless they have some roots," Masri said.

Masri said he had asked Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad to seek approval to build an access road to the Rawabi project which would circumvent the Israeli checkpoint nearby.

Israeli media said Israel had approved the access road but Masri said he had not been officially notified. Masri hopes to find customers among tens of thousands of West Bank people who have moved to Ramallah from other cities to avoid daily trips through Israeli checkpoints erected after the Palestinian uprising erupted in 2000.

Palestinians attracted by better job opportunities have also moved to Ramallah, a bustling business hub and home to the Palestinian Authority, diplomatic missions and foreign agencies. (Editing by Ori Lewis and Andrew Roche)

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