Refugees with dwindling rights

by James M. Wall in the October 20, 1999 issue

To reach the Israeli settlement of Ma'ale Adumim, you drive due east on a new highway built through the Israeli-occupied West Bank, ignoring, if you can, the occasional Palestinian refugee camp in the distance. Developed under the administration of former Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu to complete the Israeli encirclement of Jerusalem, Ma'ale Adumim is a major point of contention in the peace negotiations which have been restarted under Israel's new prime minister, Ehud Barak.

I got my first view of Ma'ale Adumim from a tent encampment, where I met with members of the Jahalin tribe of Bedouins, who were seeking to avoid being relocated by Israeli authorities. The Bedouins had already been forced to leave their grazing grounds in the Negev Desert. Now, to open up land for the further expansion of Ma'ale Adumim, they were to be moved to a new site—close to a garbage dump—unless they could persuade the Israeli courts to let them remain.

The tribe's leader, Abu Sulieman Abu Ghalia, pointed to tractors clearing land on a hill above the small valley where the Bedouins tended their goats and where children ran about, playing with discarded tires. "They want to put up more houses down here," he said. He did not sound hopeful about the legal efforts undertaken on his behalf by a coalition of peace-oriented Israelis and Palestinians.

The Bedouins eventually lost their case and were ordered to leave. The expansion of Ma'ale Adumim continues—600 new housing units are currently under construction—despite Barak's insistence that he would abide by the agreement that called for a halt in settlement construction. Hailed as a new champion for peace when he defeated Netanyahu, Barak insists he will negotiate with Arafat in good faith. But on a recent visit to Ma'ale Adumim, the prime minister told residents, "Every house that is being built is part of Israel. Forever. Period."

It is this incremental march toward permanent occupation that has so infuriated Palestinians, many of whom now feel that they can no longer look to Yasir Arafat to defend their dwindling rights. Arafat, who has his own political problems, recently

moved to confiscate "illicit firearms" in the 13 West Bank refugee camps as part of his commitment to the peace process. That action brought a strong protest from representatives of these camps, since Israelis living in settlements still retain their sidearms.

Speaking from his cell in a Palestinian Authority jail near Jericho, Jamal Tirawi told Reuters: "I am one of 17 Balata residents who have been jailed by our superiors because we decided that refugees in all refugee camps will not surrender their weapons to the Authority." There is support for Arafat's actions, however. Ghassan al-Shak'ah, the mayor of Nablus, a major Palestinian city near Balata, said the confiscation order would help "put an end to rising tensions" among Palestinians.

Under both Labor and Likud governments, Israel's policy has been to build settlements throughout the West Bank and Gaza in anticipation of the day when a peace agreement might finally be reached. I vividly recall one adamant Israeli spokesman telling me he was offended that I would use the phrase "facts on the ground" to describe the settlements. But that phrase is now freely used in Israel to describe the Israeli settlements and the highways that serve them, which together form a solid wall around Jerusalem and ensure a permanent Israeli presence throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

American politicians once agreed that these settlements were illegal, but Jimmy Carter was the last president to speak so plainly. Now U.S. presidents term the settlements as "barriers to peace," a peace which must be negotiated "among the parties involved," as the State Department says.

Among the parties involved, or at least affected by the peace process, are 3.6 million Palestinian refugees, whose families were displaced in the wars of 1946 and 1967 and who live in crowded camps in the West Bank, Gaza and in the neighboring countries of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. The right of refugees to return to the original homes of their families is one of three major issues to be negotiated over the next year between Arafat and Barak (the political makeup of Jerusalem and the presence of Israeli settlements are the other two).

Speaking in the context of the recent war in Eastern Europe, President Bill Clinton said he supported the principle that refugees should have the right to return to their homes anywhere in the world. Palestinian refugees were initially encouraged by what sounded like an endorsement of their claim that they should be allowed to go

back to their homes. But the White House quickly backed away from the president's statement, referring to negotiations among the "parties involved."

Refugees, some of whom live within sight of a settlement, with its "water fountains, shopping mall, and tidy landscaping at the edge of the desert," as one reporter recently described Ma'ale Adumim, know that even if the "principle" of their right to return is agreed upon, implementation of that principle is highly unlikely. Indeed, as Israeli and Palestinian leaders resume their task of peacemaking, outsiders who wonder how it will all turn out need only consider that the Bedouins are living next to a garbage dump, with no place to graze their goats, while new Israeli housing units continue to be built in Ma'ale Adumim.