

Israelis turn up heat in

Nerves, never very calm in the Mideast, get at their most frazzled during the holy month of Ramadan when Moslems fast and abstain from liquids during daylight hours.

The news that up to one million Soviet Jews may soon be arriving as colonists in the occupied West Bank, Gaza and Golan has produced a storm of outrage across the Moslem world on top of the usual seasonal Ramadan crankiness.

This week, Christians also got a reason to fume when it was revealed that a group of armed, militant Jewish settlers had moved, with exquisitely bad timing, into St. John's Hospice in Jerusalem, only a stone's throw from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher — right on Good Friday eve.

The gun-toting settlers had apparently covertly sublet the property through third parties, a tactic used extensively by Jewish colonists to buy up Arab land in Palestine from 1920-1947. Then, what seemed like a tempest in a teapot suddenly turned into a highly important symbolic issue when it was learned the Israeli government, in spite of strong denials, had secretly given the Jewish militants US\$1.8 million to finance the new settlement in the heart of Jerusalem's Christian quarter.

Displacing Moslems is by now routine. Displacing Christians, however, might produce a nasty backlash in the largely Christian U.S., which provinces Israel with more than US\$5 billion in annual aid.

All this comes right when Israel is asking the U.S. for US\$400 million in extra "emergency" aid to settle incoming Soviet Jews. Some sources say the total aid request could run as high as US\$3 billion in the next few years. But in response to Congressional worries, Israel promised that no U.S. money would be used to settle Jews in the occupied West Bank or Gaza.

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Quite a mess. The Israeli government was caught in a bare-faced lie and all Christian churches in Israel and Palestine closed in a 24-hour protest. Of course, no one expected Israel to keep its word, but maintaining the pretense was essential in order to get U.S. aid. Scenes of rioting Christians in Jerusalem gave pro-Israeli members of the U.S. Congress a bad case of the Easter jitters and even produced a remarkable blast at the Israeli government's poor public relations by AIPAC, the powerful Jewish lobby in Washington.

Behind this current uproar, a far more important and dangerous issue is building up. Israel, and the Arab territories it has occupied or annexed, are fast running out of water. In the past few wars, Israel seized from its Arab neighbors virtually all the major sources of water in the region. Outsiders tend to forget that in arid lands, shouting about politics and rights is often only a cover for a primitive struggle over oases and streams.

Israel's water supplies are at maximum usage. If 500,000 or one million Soviet Jews do arrive, as is now expected, there will simply not be enough water for the native Palestinian population and the new Jewish settlers — in either Israel proper or the occupied territories. There's not much doubt what will happen next.

Since Israel took over Gaza and the West Bank about

Mideast

50% of Arab land and some 65% of water sources has been expropriated in one manner or another by the Israeli government. The rightists who will probably end up forming the next government — if there ever is one — are committed to expanding Jewish settlement in the occupied territories. The inflow of a great number of Soviet Jews will ensure, hope the rightists, that in spite of a higher Arab birthrate, Jews will remain a majority in greater Israel.

Which means, as super-hawk Ariel Sharon has explained, that the Palestinians of the occupied territories will be invited to pack their bags and move to Jordan or Syria — or anywhere else. If they won't go quietly, mutter Israeli rightists, they'll have to be expelled at gunpoint to free up the land for the settlers from Russia.

In other words, a possible second Palestinian exodus and diaspora involving up to one million people.

This prospect has Moslems from Marakesh to Malacca in a rage. Since many Palestinians are Christians, bad reactions will also come from the West. And now, for the first time, in U.S. Congress a few voices are questioning why American taxpayers should finance what promises to be an increase, by an entire order of magnitude, of the already intractable fight between Jews and Arabs, as well as a grave threat to U.S. interests in the Moslem world.

But Moscow has been promised U.S. aid and concessions in exchange for letting Soviet Jews leave. The Arabs, now furious at Moscow, don't want them in the Mideast. Many Americans don't want more Soviet Jews in the U.S. And most Soviet Jews seem to want out of Mother Russia.

Welcome the newest of the world's big headaches.