

Top Israeli artists to boycott West Bank

JERUSALEM: Leading Israeli theatre artists have pledged not to perform in Jewish settlements in the West Bank, stirring a heated debate in Israel yesterday about the dozens of communities, just as Israelis and Palestinians are to embark on a new round of peace talks.

The settlements, deemed illegal by the international community and built on occupied land the Palestinians want for their state, could derail talks shortly after they are launched on Thursday.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas says he will walk out unless Israel extends a 10-month curf on settlement building that expires on September 26. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not made a commitment to an extension.

Israelis are divided over the settlements, including how many should be dismantled, if any, to enable the creation of a Palestinian state. However, the artists' refusal to perform in settlements seemed to draw more criticism than support, in large part because of great sensitivity to international boycott efforts against Israel.

Netanyahu complained yesterday that the artists were playing into the hands of what he said were international efforts to delegitimise Israel with economic, cultural and academic boycotts.

"The last thing we need at this time, while under such an attack, is an attempt for boycotts from within," he said at his weekly cabinet meeting.

The issue came to the forefront because a \$10-million (R73.5m) performing arts centre in the settlement of Ariel, one of the West Bank's largest with about 20 000 Israelis, is to open in November. Ariel Mayor Ron Nachman said the main Israeli theatre companies, including Habima National Theatre and Cameri, had agreed to put Ariel on their tour plan.

However, opposition arose in theatre circles, and so far more than 60 artists, including some of the country's best-known stage actors, have signed a pledge not to perform in Ariel, said renowned playwright Joshua Sobol, author of the Holocaust play, *The Ghetto*.