Israeli settlements in the West Bank

What is the issue?

- The United States (US) Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the US no longer thinks Israeli settlements in the West Bank violate the international law.
- The new US view is different from that of most countries' on this issue.

What are the West Bank settlements?

- After the **1948 Arab-Israeli War** the West Bank, a patch of a land about one and a half times the size of Goa, was captured by Jordan.
- Israel snatched it back during the **Six Day War of 1967**, and has occupied it ever since.
- It has built some 130 formal settlements in the West Bank, and a similar number of smaller, informal settlements have mushroomed over the last 20-25 years.
- Over 4 lakh Israeli settlers now live here, along with some 26 lakh Palestinians.
- These settlers are mostly religious Zionists who claim a Biblical birthright over this land.
- [Religious Zionists – People who follow the ideology that combines Zionism and Orthodox Judaism.]

Are these Israeli settlements illegal?

- To the vast majority of the world's nations, yes.
- The United Nations General Assembly, the UN Security Council, and the International Court of Justice have said that the West Bank settlements are violative of the **fourth Geneva Convention (1949)**.
- Under this Convention, an occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.
- Under the **Rome Statute** that set up the International Criminal Court in 1998, such transfers constitute war crimes.
- This is so as the extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly.
- Under the **Oslo Accords** of the 1990s, both Israel and the Palestinians agreed that the status of settlements would be decided by negotiations.

- But the negotiations process has been dead for several years now.
- Israel walked into East Jerusalem in 1967, and subsequently annexed it. For Israel, Jerusalem is non-negotiable.
- The Palestinians want East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. Most of the world's nations look at it as occupied territory.

What was the American stand earlier?

- **In 1978**, when Jimmy Carter was President, the State Department concluded that the Israeli settlements were inconsistent with international law.
- **In 1981**, President Ronald Reagan said that he do not agree - even though the establishment of new Israeli communities in Palestinian territory was indeed "unnecessarily provocative".
- Thereafter, the US took the line that the settlements were illegitimate, not illegal and blocked UN resolutions condemning Israel for them.
- **In 2016**, President Barack Obama broke with this policy and the US did not veto a resolution that called for an end to Israeli settlements.
- **In November 2019**, Pompeo said that they had carefully studied all sides of the legal debate and their administration agrees with President Reagan.
- He also said that the establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law.

What impact will the change have?

- Those who support the right of Israelis to settle in the West Bank are likely to see the decision as an endorsement.
- It will boost Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has promised sweeping annexations in the West Bank.
- However, Pompeo did not come out as directly backing the settlers.
- He said that there will never be a judicial resolution to this conflict and arguments about who is right and wrong as a matter of international law will not bring peace.
- He also said that this is a complex political problem that can only be solved by negotiations.

Source: The Indian Express

Quick Facts

Oslo Accords 1993

- The Oslo Accords or Agreement is an agreement signed between the State of

Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993.

- It was meant to effectively bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to its end by means of territorial concessions and facilitating the creation of the Palestinian Authority.
- This accord is a milestone in Israeli-Palestinian relations as this is the first time they both formally recognized one another.

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