

overall security and foreign affairs in these "autonomous" areas.

● In the West Bank, for the time being, Israel will dominate the area between Gaza and Jericho, the Allenby Bridge to Jordan, and almost all the water and land, a good percentage of which it has already taken.

One question remains: how much land is Israel in fact going to cede for peace?

Small-town government

Clearly the PLO has transformed itself from a national liberation movement into a kind of small-town government, with the same handful of people in command. PLO offices abroad — all of them the result of years of costly struggle whereby the Palestinian people earned the right to represent themselves — are being closed, sold off, deliberately neglected.

For the more than 50% of the Palestinian people not resident in the occupied territories — 350 000 stateless refugees in Lebanon, twice that number in Syria, many more elsewhere — the plan may be the final dispossession. Their national rights as people made refugees in 1948 (solemnly confirmed and reconfirmed for years by the UN, the PLO, the Arab governments, indeed most of the world) now seem to have been annulled.

Embarrassment

All secret deals between a very strong and a very weak partner necessarily involve concessions hidden in embarrassment by the latter. Yes, there are still lots of details to be negotiated, as there are many imponderables to be made clear, and even some hopes to be fulfilled or dashed.

Still, the deal before us smacks of the PLO leadership's exhaustion and isolation — and of Israel's shrewdness. Many Palestinians are asking themselves why, after years of concessions, we should be conceding once again to Israel and the US in return for promises and vague improvements in the occupation that won't all occur until "final status" talks three to five years hence, and perhaps not even then.

We have not even had an explicit acknowledgment from Israel to end the occupation, with its maze of laws and complicated punitive apparatus.

Nothing is said about the 17 000

A savage turn

Dossiers compiled by human rights organisations testify to the savage turn in Israel's counter-insurgency operations this year.

Between February and May — the months immediately preceding and following the closure of the territories — 67 Palestinians were killed by the IDF in the Gaza Strip alone, 29 of them in May, making it the bloodiest month of the uprising.

A staggering 1522 residents were injured, of whom 474 were children. Live ammunition caused 98% of the injuries. Ten 'search operations' were carried out, rendering 450 people permanently homeless (or, as one local put it, 'refugees from refugee camps') and causing over \$50-million damage to property.

Meanwhile, Palestinians were beaten, their houses raided, their localities curfewed, with such monotony that most lawyers and human rights researchers simply gave up counting.

Today, as peace dawns, there are still 17 000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons and detention camps, two-thirds of whom are from Gaza and most of them rounded up in the last year.

political prisoners who remain in Israeli jails. And can the Israeli army march in at will? Who decides and when?

Any "peace agreement" must contain the understanding that Palestinians have a right to freedom and equality and will concede nothing from that right. Limited "self-rule", after all, is not something around which to mobilise or give long-term hope to people.

Above all, Palestinians now must have the widest possible say in their future, as it is largely about to be settled, perhaps irrevocably and unwisely.

Death of democracy

It is disturbing that the Palestinian National Council has not been called into session, and that the appalling disarray induced by Arafat's recent methods has not been addressed.

I count no more than five people holed up in Tunis (including Arafat) who, with little legal background or experience of ordinary civil life, have hatched decisions affecting almost six million people. There has been no con-

sultation to speak of.

In the territories, the occupation has been getting worse, and this after ten rounds of fruitless negotiations. When I was there earlier this year no-one I spoke with failed to make the connection, blaming Arafat and the delegation members in equal measure. Then in August three leading negotiators resigned, bewailing Arafat's undemocratic methods, implying that while they bled themselves dry with the Israelis, Arafat had opened up a secret channel for his negotiations.

With the PLO in decomposition and conditions in the territories abysmal, there never was a worse internal crisis for Palestinians — until Arafat rushed into the Israeli plan, which in one stroke rids the Israelis of an unwanted, insurrectionary problem that Arafat must now work at solving for them.

I admire those few Palestinian officials who bravely aver that this may be the first step toward ending the occupation. But anyone who knows the increasingly slapdash, not to say irresponsible, methods of Arafat's leadership — his lack of care, precision and seriousness — is advised to start working for a different future.

No political settlement of a long and bloody conflict can ever fit all circumstances. To be recognised at last by Israel and the US may mean personal fulfillment for some, but it doesn't answer Palestinian needs or solve the leadership crisis.

Our struggle is about freedom and democracy; it is secular and, for a long time — indeed, up until the past three years — it was fairly democratic. Arafat has cancelled the intifada unilaterally, with possible results in further dislocations, disappointments and conflict for both Palestinians and Israelis. In recent years Arafat's PLO, our only national institution, has refused to mobilise its various dispersed constituencies, to attract its people's best talents.

Now it may try to regain the loyalty and compliance it expects before it plunges into a new phase, having seemed to mortgage its future without serious debate, without adequate preparation, without telling its people the full and bitter truth. Can it succeed, and still represent the Palestinian nation? ■