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Israel releases over 330 prisoners

BETUNIA (Agencies): Israel released more than 330 Palestinian prisoners on Wednesday in what it called a gesture to bolster a US-backed peace "road map." Palestinian officials dismissed the move as a sham.

The first prisoner freed flashed a V-for-victory sign at cheering relatives waiting at a checkpoint outside the West Bank town of Betunia and smiled broadly as he stepped off a bus that brought him from an Israeli jail.

Others kissed the ground, watched closely by armed Israeli soldiers, before boarding Palestinian vans for the trip home for tearful reunions and embraces with relatives and friends.

A Jewish settler carrying a protest banner broke through a security cordon and ran at the buses carrying the detainees to freedom but was wrestled to the ground by troops and hauled off.

Right-wing Israelis and rela-

tives of victims of Palestinian suicide bombings opposed the decision to begin freeing the Palestinians, though none of those released was directly involved in attacks.

"We hope this is a trust-building move that will help promote the (peace) process," said Amnon Perlman, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Palestinians, who regard the prisoners as heroes of their nationalist cause, said the release did not go far enough and demanded amnesty for all 6,000 detainees in Israeli jails.

"It is worthless and meaningless," Palestinian cabinet minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said. "It is a theatrical step to appease Washington." The dispute led Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas to pull out of talks set for Wednesday with Sharon on the road map, which aims to end a 34-month-old Palestinian uprising with the promise of statehood in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by 2005.