

# Court orders changes to West Bank wall

Agencies

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The Israeli supreme court today ordered changes to Israel's controversial West Bank wall, saying the current route was causing too much harm to the local Palestinian population.

The court said such harm must be minimised, even if doing so resulted in less security for Israel.

Israel began construction of the network of fences and walls in 2002, saying it was needed to keep out Palestinian suicide bombers. However, Palestinians regard the structure, which dips into the West Bank, as a means of annexing occupied territory.

Around one-quarter of the 425-mile (680km) barrier has been completed.

Today's ruling said: "The route disrupts the delicate balance between the obligation of the military commander to preserve security and his obligation to provide for the needs of the local inhabitants.

"The route that the military commander established for the security fence ... injures the local inhabitants in a severe and acute way while violating their rights under humanitarian and international law."

The hearing focused on a partially built, 25-mile (40-km) stretch of the barrier north-west of Jerusalem. Some residents of an Israeli town on the border with the West Bank also lent support to the Palestinians' objections to the wall.

Mohammed Dahla, a lawyer acting for the opponents of the barrier, said the stretch of wall would disrupt the lives of 45,000 people, living in ten villages, cutting many of them off from their farmland, olive and citrus groves, schools and jobs.

The Israeli ministry of defence had argued the route of the wall had to loop out from the border into the West Bank, to create a "security buffer".

The court had ordered construction in the area to be halted in March, while the case was pending. In its decision today, the court ordered changes applying to 20 miles (30km) of the length of the wall, Israeli army radio reported.

Mr Dahla said the decision would force Israel to dismantle some sections that have already been built.

The ruling said: "The route of the separation fence severely violated the right of the population and their freedom of movement ... their livelihood is severely impaired ... these injuries are not proportionate. They can be substantially decreased by an alternate route."

The case was seen as a test for more than 20 similar disputes. The wall dips deeply into the West Bank in some areas and has resulted in farmland being destroyed, land confiscated and Palestinian villages isolated.

Today's ruling comes ahead of a decision expected on Thursday next week at the international court in the Hague, Netherlands, after the UN asked it to examine the legality of the barrier.