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The Weekly Israel News Update

Artzeinu ◦ www.artzeinu.org ◦ Vol. 21 No. 684 ◦ January 15, 2022

Bibi said close to deal removing him from politics

Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu and Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit are close to reaching a deal that would see the former prime minister leave politics, media reports claimed on Thursday via the Jerusalem Post.

Netanyahu – currently head of the opposition – would reportedly leave the Knesset and in exchange, Case 2000 would be closed and the bribery charge in Case 4000 would be removed. In return, Netanyahu would plead guilty to the remaining charges of fraud and breach of trust, and would receive a sentence of community service without jail time.

A resignation by Netanyahu would create a political earthquake in Israel. Not only would it launch a race to replace him as head of the Likud, but it will also likely lead to the collapse of the current coalition led by Naftali Bennett. A new Likud leader would be able to draw right-wing parties away and establish an alternative coalition without Israel needing a new election.

The State Attorney's Office refused to confirm nor deny the reports.

Netanyahu was indicted in 2019 for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He is currently on trial for bribery in Case 4000, known as the "Bezeq-Walla affair."

Coronavirus chief refuses to rule out another lockdown

Israel's national coronavirus response coordinator, Salman Zarka, warned on Thursday that Israel could find itself once again under a nationwide lockdown if the Omicron surge is not properly dealt with, Israel Hayom reports.

Zarka said hospital staff shortages and taxed facilities could lead to a lockdown, like the first one, "where people would not be allowed to go more than 100 m (330 ft) from their home."

Coronavirus is surging in Israel. The Health Ministry reported nearly 50,000 new coronavirus cases in Israel on Thursday morning. Altogether, more than 400,000 Israelis were screened for the virus in the 24 hours leading up to Thursday morning, putting the infection rate at about 11.9%.

There were 258,664 active cases in Israel Thursday, with 879 patients hospitalized. Of those, 283 were in serious condition.

Zarka said that the current infection wave "has combined the Omicron and the Delta variants, and it's still on an upward trajectory." He stressed that the actual number of cases might be much greater than the official figure, because "some of the infected are not reporting their results from the at-home tests."

Zarka noted that the severe COVID-19 cases are "largely limited to those older than 60 and those not fully vaccinated." He urged Israelis who have not had their booster shot to get jabbed, especially older cohorts.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, Israel has reported nearly 1.7 million cases, including 8,290 deaths.

Bennett discusses Iran, regional security with Putin

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday to discuss the threat posed by Iran, as the Islamic republic and world powers continue talks in Vienna aimed at reviving the 2015 nuclear deal, Israel Hayom reports.

According to Bennett, the two leaders discussed a number of issues, primarily matters of regional security, agreeing to continue their "close cooperation" in the region. Bennett wrote on Twitter that he pressed Putin on stemming Iran's nuclear project.

Putin reportedly invited Bennett and his wife to visit St. Petersburg, and Bennett is said to have accepted the invitation. The two leaders last met in the Russian resort city of Sochi in October.

Israel Hayom reported that Putin and Bennett agreed to expand their dialogue on the Iranian nuclear threat and the regime's activity in Syria. According to sources, Moscow disapproves of Tehran's nuclear progress and is concerned with its efforts to enrich uranium to a military level.

Iran spy ring of Israelis smashed, Shin Bet says

The Shin Bet security service has arrested five Jewish Israelis accused of assisting an Iranian operative, who often pretended to be a Jewish man, in gathering intelligence and making connections in Israel, the Shin Bet said Wednesday, The Times of Israel reports.

In some cases, the suspects told investigators they were aware that the Iranian intelligence agent known as Rambud Namdar may have been an Iranian intelligence operative, but continued their communications with him anyway, according to the security service. The five suspects — four women and one man — are all Jewish immigrants from Iran or the descendants of Iranian immigrants. Their names were barred from publication under a court-issued gag order requested by their attorneys.

According to the Shin Bet, the suspects

took photographs of strategically significant sites in Israel, including the US Consulate in Tel Aviv; attempted to form relationships with politicians; provided information about security arrangements at different sites; and committed other offenses — all at the direction of Namdar. The Iranian operative paid the Israelis thousands of dollars for the intelligence.

Two of the suspects also attempted to convince their sons to join an IDF Military Intelligence unit, the Shin Bet said. However, as none of the suspects allegedly involved in the case had access to significant classified material, there was no indication that this spy ring seriously compromised national security.

Bedouin riot against JNF tree planting in Negev

More than 2,000 Bedouin took part in a violent demonstration on Road 31 against the Jewish National Fund's planting of trees in the Negev Thursday, Arutz Sheva reports.

During the protest, protesters threw stones at police forces. The demonstrators blocked the road and the police pushed them back to the nearby village of Al Atrash. Twelve protesters were injured in the clashes, including two who were evacuated to Soroka Hospital in Be'er Sheva in moderate condition.

Police said: "We will allow the freedom of protest as long as it is conducted in a legal manner. We will act with zero tolerance against disturbances."

The Bedouin riots resumed Thursday, despite the compromise reached Wednesday under which the tree planting was halted.

Officer's report warns of 'morbid culture' in IDF

A senior military official recently sent IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi a lengthy report alleging a gross erosion of ethics and morals among army ranks, severe issues with the military's organizational culture, as well as "massive corruption," Israel Hayom reports.

The report comes on the heels of a recent Israel Democracy Institute study, which found that the Israeli public's confidence in the IDF has greatly eroded.

The three-volume report was penned by Col. Alon Madanes, former military attaché to the United States.

Madanes' report is said to focus on "suspicions of corruption in the IDF, the defense establishment and the military industries, as well as on operational failures and a morbid organizational culture, including commanders' fears of expressing independent opinions."

The IDF, in a statement, said that while the military does not comment on closed-door meetings or internal reports, "Morality is a core IDF value, and at any case where there is a deviation from this, it is and will be treated harshly."

2 Egoz commandos killed by friendly fire

Two IDF commando officers were killed in a friendly fire shooting accident on Wednesday night, World Israel News reports.

The officers were identified as Maj. Itamar Elharar, 26, and Maj. Ofek Aharon, 28, who both served as company commanders in the Egoz unit.

They were "killed after a mistaken identification led to a friendly fire incident," an IDF statement read. The tragic accident happened shortly after the officers were involved in security operations in the Jordan Valley, near the Nabi Musa base. Having noticed a suspicious figure after patrolling the area, the officers initiated an arrest procedure, when another IDF soldier nearby misidentified the officers as terrorists who had infiltrated the base and shot toward

them, according to an initial investigation.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz promised a "comprehensive investigation" in order "to make sure that such an accident never happens again."

President's mother buried

Aura Herzog, mother of President Isaac Herzog and Israeli Ambassador to the US Michael Herzog, was laid to rest on Wednesday morning. She passed away on Monday at the age of 97.

She was buried next to her husband, the late President Chaim Herzog, in the Great Leaders of the Nation's Plot in the National Cemetery on Mount Herzl, in Jerusalem.

'Killer Zionist dolphins'

Hamas on Monday accused Israel of using a dolphin to chase Hamas frogman commandos off the coast of the Gaza Strip, The Jerusalem Post reports, citing a news item in Al-Quds.

An Al-Qassam Brigades naval commandos spokesman said that during an operation at an unspecified time, Hamas naval operatives were reported chased into the sea by a dolphin equipped with a device capable of killing the terrorist group's frogmen.

The exact nature and function of the aquatic attacker's device were not revealed, but Al-Quds claimed it had sources that disclosed another "combat dolphin" incident in August 2015. That dolphin reportedly was equipped with a remote control, a camera and a weapon that could fire harpoon-like projectiles.

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Artzeinu, online at www.artzeinu.org, is published weekly by Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, 125 E. 85th Street, New York, NY 10028. To get Artzeinu in your shul, email iss@ckj.org. The Artzeinu team: Bennett R. Katz, JJ Hornblass. Founder: Deena Shiff.