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01.17.20 – Fr -

Acting UNRWA head says U.S., Israel working against funding Palestine refugees

01.17.20

Acting UNRWA head says U.S., Israel working against it

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees faced budgetary difficulties since 2018, when Trump halted annual American aid of \$360 million while its former commissioner-general resigned amid probe into misconduct allegations

Reuters| Published: 01.17.20 , 08:40

The interim head of the UN agency that aids Palestinian refugees on Thursday accused pro-Israel groups of lobbying foreign parliaments to stop donations, even as it struggled to recover from losing United States funding in 2018.

Christian Saunders, in an interview with Reuters in his Gaza office, also said Israel was seeking to replace United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) services for Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem with those of its own.

UNRWA has faced budgetary difficulties since 2018, when the United States, its biggest donor, halted its annual aid of \$360 million. The United States and Israel have both accused UNRWA of mismanagement and anti-Israeli incitement.

Last November, UNRWA commissioner-general Pierre Krahenbuhl resigned amid an investigation into misconduct allegations.

In the interview, Saunders, now acting commissioner-general, said the inquiry by the U.N. Office of Internal Oversight Services was complete and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had confirmed there had been no corruption or misuse of funds.

Saunders said the investigation had uncovered mismanagement related to human resources and abuse of authority, and that major donors, who had withheld funding while the inquiry was underway, have resumed contributions.

Saunders said he felt confident UNRWA had enough money for at least the first quarter of 2020, but he expected it to be an "even more difficult" year than last. He added that they had not given up on persuading the United States to change its mind about funding.

"We are engaged with the U.S., we will continue to engage with them in the hopes that they will see UNRWA as a reliable partner and worth supporting," Saunders said in the interview.

Saunders initially said that Israel and the United States were "advocating against funding UNRWA in the European parliaments and elsewhere," but later clarified in a statement that he was referring to pro-Israel groups. He said UNRWA "had no reason to believe that the U.S. was engaged in lobbying to stop funding the agency."

He said UNRWA was feeling "the pressure in East Jerusalem in particular", saying that Israel was in the process of building schools and institutions "to compete" with the agency and stop it from operating there.

"The important thing to remember here is that UNRWA has a mandate from the (U.N.) General Assembly, from the rest of the world, the member states, to provide services to Palestinian refugees in East Jerusalem," Saunders said.

Israel considers all of Jerusalem, including the eastern part captured along the West Bank in 1967, as its "indivisible capital". Palestinians want East Jerusalem to be the capital of a state they seek to establish in the West Bank and Gaza.

01.16.20 – Th -

Gantz vows to reverse decision of bus services axed over operating close to Shabbat

01.16.20

Fury as Shabbat bus services axed over religious community complaints

Gantz vows to reverse decision after it emerges that more and more bus lines are being canceled due to complaints to Transportation Ministry from observant Jewish public; official says move is implementation of government policy
Yuval Karni, Roi Rubenstein | Published: 01.16.20, 17:49

A decision by the Transportation Ministry to ax dozens of bus lines that operate before the end of Shabbat came under furious criticism Thursday by politicians from across the spectrum, as well as from campaigners for more public transport on weekends.

It has emerged that more and more bus lines that for years operated on Shabbat with the agreement of local authorities are being canceled due to complaints to the Transportation Ministry from the religious public.

A ministry official also said that several dozen lines that were operating close to Shabbat have been axed to prevent desecration of the sabbath.

"We have chosen to consider the religious public where possible without compromising the routine of the [majority] secular public," the official said.

"People must understand that we are implementing government policy."

The head of the centrist Blue & White Benny Gantz vowed to reverse the decision should his party be victorious in the March 2 Knesset elections.

"The State of Israel is a Jewish state, not a halakhic state," Gantz said, referring to Jewish religious law.

"We will win [in the elections] and we will rectify this. Everyone can live here in their own way," he said.

The head of the right-wing secular Yisrael Beytenu party, Avigdor Liberman, branded the decision regressive "religious coercion."

The current minister is religious MK Bezalel Smotrich, a strong backer of Netanyahu and leader of the far-right National Union party.

"This is about power, bullying and religious coercion," Liberman said. "The man who wants to take us back to the time of King David, King Saul and Torah law, again proves that these are not merely empty declarations, but, unfortunately, deeds too," said

Liberman, who has vowed Yisrael Beytenu will never join a coalition with the ultra-Orthodox parties.

"Smotrich, a member of a [party] that purports to represent the enlightened liberal right, has exposed its true face," he said.

"Yisrael Beytenu will demand as a precondition for joining the next coalition that the issue of public transportation and the opening of businesses on Shabbat will be the sole responsibility of local government."

Yisrael Beytenu MK Oded Forer, meanwhile, accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of entrusting the ministry to supporters of his bid to seek parliamentary immunity for his criminal indictments.

"The local authorities, whose leaders are elected by the public, are the ones who must decide, and not those who are appointed as a reward for supporting immunity for the prime minister," Forer said.

"Smotrich, who serves as minister without the trust of the public or the Knesset, is confident that he can run everyone's lives and take another step to make Israel into a halakhic state."

Roy Schwartz-Tichon, founder and chairman of the Noa Movement for public transportation on Shabbat, also accused Smotrich, who is a religious Jew, of forcing his own convictions on the rest of the population.

"Transportation Minister Smotrich is hijacking and cancelling the few [public transport options] that the Transportation Ministry itself saw as necessary to implement on Shabbat. This is ridiculous," he said.

"The transportation minister should act out of professional considerations for passenger welfare and not out of unrelated considerations," he said.

"In the past two months, the shuttles that have been scheduled for Shabbat transportation have shown the extent to which it is necessary for everyone in the State of Israel.

"When the lines are filled, bolstered and filled again and again, we will fight the hijacker and continue to lead the fight for transportation on Shabbat for the 80% of the Israeli public who want it, to allow everyone to choose how to spend their Shabbat."

Uri Keidar, director-general of the Be Free Israel movement, said: "Anyone who chooses an extreme revolutionary such as Smotrich for the post of transportation minister will not be able to hide behind him as he ignites a fire against the public in Israel.

"The damage to lines that [serve] the periphery before the end of Shabbat is the responsibility of Netanyahu and [Defense Minister Naftali] Bennett, first and foremost of the soldiers and members of the population who cannot afford their own cars," Keidar said.

"Anyone who thinks he can stop the Shabbat public transport train – which has already left the station - will discover in the upcoming elections that the public will punish him and anyone who supports it."

MK Itzik Shmuli, of Labor-Gesher-Meretz, also slammed the new policy.

"We will fight the decision in every way," he said, adding that this shift will directly affect "the soldiers, the elderly and the poor."

01.16.20 – Th -

Trump impeachment trial opens; wolves & lawyers are surrounding White House

01.16.20

Trump impeachment trial opens; White House faulted on Ukraine aid freeze

Assessment from nonpartisan Government Accountability Office is setback for president, while unclear if it will figure in trial in GOP-led Senate, with issues such as whether witnesses appear or new evidence considered stay up in air

Reuters| Published: 01.16.20 , 23:14

The Senate impeachment trial on whether to remove U.S. President Donald Trump from office formally began on Thursday even as a congressional watchdog found that the White House broke the law by withholding security aid for Ukraine approved by Congress.

The assessment from the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office was a setback for Trump, even though it was unclear if it would figure in his trial in the Republican-led Senate given that key issues such as whether witnesses will appear or new evidence will be considered remain up in the air.

Democrat Adam Schiff, who heads a team of seven House of Representatives members who will serve as prosecutors, appeared on the Senate floor to read the two charges passed by the House on Dec. 18 accusing Trump of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress arising from his dealings with Ukraine.

Chief Justice John Roberts, wearing his black judicial robe, was led onto the Senate floor by four senior lawmakers.

He took an oath to preside over the trial and then swore in the assembled senators, instructing them to raise their right hand, asking, "Do you solemnly swear that in all things appertaining to the trial of the impeachment of Donald John Trump, president of the United States, now pending you will do impartial justice according to the Constitution and laws, so help you God?"

The 99 senators present signed their assent one by one. One senator - Republican Jim Inhofe - was in his home state of Oklahoma to be with a family member facing a medical issue, according to his office, but was due to sign later in the day.

Opening statements in the trial were due to start on Tuesday. The Senate is expected to acquit Trump, as none of its 53 Republicans has voiced support for removing him, a step that requires a two-thirds majority. Trump has denied wrongdoing and has called the impeachment process a sham.

The abuse of power cited in the House articles of impeachment included Trump's withholding of \$391 million in security aid for Ukraine, a move Democrats have said was aimed at pressuring Kiev into investigating political rival Joe Biden, the president's possible opponent in the Nov. 3 U.S. election.

"Faithful execution of the law does not permit the President to substitute his own policy priorities for those that Congress has enacted into law," the GAO report released on Thursday stated, referring to the fact that Congress had already voted to appropriate the funds.

An arm of Congress, the GAO is viewed as a top auditing agency for the federal government that advises lawmakers and various government entities on how taxpayer dollars are spent.

"This reinforces - again - the need for documents and eyewitnesses in the Senate," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, told a news conference.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, has said senators should consider only the evidence amassed by the House.

Democrat sought report

The GAO issued its opinion after receiving a letter inquiring about the aid from Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen. The agency's findings are not legally binding, but its reports are seen by lawmakers as objective, reliable and generally uncontested. The GAO has no prosecutorial power.

Its report noted that the U.S. Constitution grants a president no unilateral authority to withhold funds in the way that Trump did. Instead, a president has a "strictly circumscribed authority" to withhold spending only in limited circumstances expressly provided by law.

Holding up money for a policy reason, which the Trump administration did in this case, is not permitted, the report said.

Asked about the GAO report, House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy defended Trump's withholding of aid, citing concerns about corruption in Ukraine's new government.

"I think it was the rightful thing to do," McCarthy told a news conference.

Congress approved the \$391 million to help Ukraine combat Russia-backed separatists in the eastern part of the country. The money ultimately was provided to Kiev in September after the controversy had spilled into public view.

A pivotal event leading to Trump's impeachment was a July 25 call in which he asked Ukraine's president to investigate Biden and his son Hunter Biden over unsubstantiated allegations of corruption and to look into a discredited theory that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the 2016 U.S. election.

Schiff indicated that the House prosecutors were considering calling Lev Parnas, an associate of Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, as a witness if the Senate permits testimony in the trial.

"We are continuing to review his (media) interviews and the materials he has provided to evaluate his potential testimony in the Senate trial," Schiff said in a statement.

Giuliani has said Parnas, a Ukraine-born U.S. citizen, helped him in investigating the Bidens. Documents released this week indicate Parnas was also involved in monitoring the movements of former ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch before Trump removed her in May after being urged to do so by Giuliani.

01.15.20 – We -

Putin engineers shakeup of future Cabinet appointments to keep him in power

01.15.20

Putin engineers shakeup that could keep him in power longer

The former KGB operative, who has led Russia for more than 20 years, surprises the country's political elites with a series of constitutional amendments intended to carve out a position for him once his term ends

Associated Press | Published: 01.15.20, 20:02

President Vladimir Putin engineered a surprise shakeup of Russia's leadership Wednesday, proposing changes to the constitution that could keep him in power well past the end of his term in 2024.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev resigned his post after Putin announced the proposed constitutional amendments. Putin kept his longtime ally in the Kremlin's leadership structure, appointing him to the newly created post of deputy head of the presidential Security Council.

The shakeup sent shock waves through Russia's political elites who were left pondering what Putin's intentions were and speculating about future Cabinet appointments.

Putin's proposed constitutional reforms, announced in a state of the nation address, indicated he was working to carve out a new governing position for himself after his term ends, although the suggested changes don't immediately indicate what specific path he will take to stay in charge.

The 67-year-old former KGB operative, who has led Russia for more than 20 years, often keeps his intentions secret until the very last moment.

Alexei Navalny, the most prominent Russian opposition leader, tweeted that Putin's speech clearly signaled his desire to continue calling the shots even after his term ends. "The only goal of Putin and his regime is to stay in charge for life, having the entire country as his personal asset and seizing its riches for himself and his friends," Navalny said.

The Kremlin later announced that Tax Service chief Mikhail Mishustin was nominated to replace Medvedev, who has been prime minister for nearly eight years. Approval by the Duma is virtually certain.

After Putin's first two terms ended in 2008, Medvedev served as a placeholder president for just one term, from 2008 to 2012 and appointed his mentor as prime minister, although Putin continued to wield power. Under Medvedev, the constitution was amended to lengthen the president's term from four years to six, although it limits the leader to two consecutive terms.

In televised comments Wednesday, Medvedev said he needed to resign in light of Putin's proposed changes in government.

Putin suggested amending the constitution again to allow lawmakers to name prime ministers and Cabinet members. The president currently holds the authority to make those appointments.

"It will increase the role of parliament and parliamentary parties, powers and independence of the prime minister and all Cabinet members," Putin told an audience of top officials and lawmakers.

At the same time, Putin argued that Russia would not remain stable if it were governed under a parliamentary system. The president should retain the right to dismiss the prime

minister and Cabinet ministers, to name top defense and security officials, and to be in charge of the Russian military and law enforcement agencies, he said.

Putin emphasized that constitutional changes must be put to a nationwide vote.

Putin has been in power longer than any other Russian or Soviet leader since Josef Stalin, who led from 1924 until his death in 1953. Under the current law, Putin must step down in 2024 after his term ends.

Observers speculated that Putin may stay in charge by shifting into the prime minister's seat after increasing the powers of parliament and the Cabinet and trimming presidential authority.

Political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin said Putin's speech made it clear he was pondering the move to premiership.

"Putin is advancing the idea of keeping his authority as a more powerful and influential prime minister while the presidency will become more decorative," Oreshkin said.

In his address, Putin said the constitution must also specify the authority of the State Council consisting of regional governors and top federal officials.

Tatiana Stanovaya of the Carnegie Moscow Center said it appears as if Putin might try to continue pulling the strings as head of the council and could even shift into a new position before his term ends.

"It looks very much like Putin is preparing to leave the presidency, whether that will take place in 2024 or even earlier, and is currently trying to create a safety mechanism for his successor in case of conflict," she wrote on Facebook. "Putin looks like he is counting on becoming the head of the State Council, which will get increased powers and become a key decision-making platform with input from the Presidential Administration, the government and the governors."

Other possible options include a merger with neighboring Belarus that would create a new position of the head of a new unified state - a prospect that has been rejected by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Political analyst Kirill Rogov said that Putin intends to stay in charge while re-distributing powers between various branches of government.

"Such a model resembling the Chinese one would allow Putin to stay at the helm indefinitely while encouraging rivalry between potential successors," □ Rogov observed. In 2017, Chinese leader Xi Jinping had term limits abolished, which would effectively keep him in power for life, although Putin appears to favor more intricate ways of staying in charge than abolishing term limits.

Although Putin continued calling the shots during Medvedev's presidency, he wasn't totally happy with all his actions. He was particularly critical of Medvedev's decision to give the green light to the Western air campaign in Libya in 2011 that led to the ouster and killing of long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

Medvedev's decision to step down and let Putin return to the presidency also sparked massive protests in Moscow in 2011-2012 in a major challenge to the Kremlin. Some of Putin's associates suspected Medvedev's aides of encouraging the protests.

In his speech, Putin emphasized the need to amend the constitution to give it a clear priority over international law.

"The requirements of international law and treaties and decisions of international organs can only be valid on the territory of Russia as long as they don't restrict human rights and freedoms and don't contradict the constitution," he said.

He also said that the constitution must be tweaked to say that top government officials aren't allowed to have foreign citizenship or residence permits.

Putin also vowed to encourage population growth by offering additional subsidies to families that have children.

He said that Russia would remain open for cooperation with all countries while maintaining a strong defense capability to fend off potential threats.

01.15.20 – Th -

Egypt's gas hub running at less than their potential capacity can be used for exports

01.15.20

Egypt's push to be east Mediterranean gas hub

With a vast network of gas pipelines, advanced infrastructure and convenient location, the country hopes to become a vital link for energy trading between Mideast, Africa and Europe

Reuters| Published: 01.15.20 , 19:00

Egypt began importing gas from Israel's largest offshore gas field, Leviathan, on Wednesday, a step Cairo hopes will help it become a regional energy hub.

Rapid growth in Egypt's natural gas supplies, boosted by the discovery of the Mediterranean's largest field, turned it from a net importer to an exporter in late 2018.

ISRAEL DEAL

Egypt's Dolphin Holdings signed deals with partners in Israeli gas fields to buy an estimated \$19.5 billion of gas.

Partners in Israeli fields Leviathan and Tamar will supply Egypt with 85.3 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas over 15 years.

Texas-based Noble Energy, Israel's Delek Drilling and Ratio Oil own Leviathan. Noble, Delek Drilling, Isramco and Tamar Petroleum are leading partners in the Tamar field.

It is unclear how much of the gas imported from Israel will be re-exported.

LNG PLANTS

Egypt hopes its infrastructure and location will help it become a link for energy trading between the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Crucially, Egypt has two liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants that have been idled or running at less than their potential capacity and can be used for exports.

The bulk of Egypt's gas exports is liquefied natural gas sent from its Idku liquefaction terminal, run by Egyptian LNG, a joint venture between the state-owned Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation and EGAS, as well as Royal Dutch Shell, Petronas and Engie.

It has two operational LNG trains, each with a capacity of 3.6 million tonnes, according to Egyptian LNG's website. The site has room for an additional four trains.

Egypt has a second gas liquefaction plant at Damietta that has been idle since February 2013 after gas production slipped and the government diverted gas exports to the domestic market.

It has also been at the center of a dispute between Egypt and Italian-Spanish company Union Fenosa Gas (UFG), which has a majority stake.

Damietta has an annual capacity of up to 5 million tonnes and can store 130,000 tonnes of LNG, government websites show.

Egypt exported the equivalent of 172.8 billion cubic feet (bcf) LNG in the 2018/19 fiscal year ending in June, according to EGAS's annual report. Egypt also exported 53 bcf to Jordan by pipeline and imported 51.6 bcf of LNG in the same period.

PIPELINES

Egypt also has a network of gas pipelines, the most significant of which is the Arab Gas Pipeline which extends across northern Sinai via Al-Arish to Jordan and on to Syria and Lebanon. Egypt currently only exports gas to Jordan through it.

The Arab Gas Pipeline connects to Israel via the underwater Arish-Ashkelon pipeline, which Egypt once used to export gas to Israel. Israeli gas from the 22 trillion cubic feet (tcf) offshore Leviathan and later the smaller Tamar field will flow to Egypt via that pipeline.

The Arish-Ashkelon pipeline is owned by the East Mediterranean Gas Company (EMG). Noble and Delek partnered with Egypt's East Gas Company in a venture called EMED to buy a 39% stake in EMG to facilitate the export deal.

Egypt also has the Sumed pipeline, which carries oil from a terminal at Ain Sokhna on the Red Sea to the Sidi Kerir terminal on the Mediterranean.

PRODUCTION BOOM

The 2015 discovery of the giant Zohr field by Italy's Eni was a turning point, unlocking interest in Egypt's energy market. Zohr, located in the Shorouk concession, holds an estimated 30 tcf of natural gas.

Egypt produced 2.52 tcf of gas in 2018/19, the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (EGAS) said in its annual report.

The company made 15 gas discoveries in the year and seven gas development projects were came on stream at a cost of \$10.6 billion. Fifty-six wells came on stream during the year.

Some 58% of Egypt's gas production comes from the Mediterranean, 20% from the Western Desert, 20% from the Nile Delta region and 2% from the Gulf of Suez and Sinai peninsula, according to EGAS.

RISKS

Cairo's plans to become an energy hub faces some risks.

Turkey, a political rival of Egypt's, signed in November an agreement on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean with Libya's internationally recognized government. The accord is seen primarily as a move to control hydrocarbon drilling rights.

Greece said in December that it, Cyprus and Israel will go ahead with developing a pipeline channeling natural gas from the eastern Mediterranean directly to Europe, potentially undercutting Egypt's hub goals.

01.17.20 – Fr -

Khamenei gave Iranians first Friday sermon in Tehran in eight years

01.17.20

Khamenei: Trump is a 'clown' who will betray Iranians

Thousands attended the Friday sermon led by the Iranian leader, chanting 'death to America'; Ayatollah calls European powers 'servants' to the United States
Associated Press| Published: 01.17.20 , 14:48

Iran's supreme leader said President Donald Trump is a "clown" who only pretends to support the Iranian people but will "push a poisonous dagger" into their backs, as he struck a defiant tone in his first Friday sermon in Tehran in eight years.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the mass funerals for Iran's top general, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike earlier this month, show that the Iranian people support the Islamic Republic despite its recent trials.

He said the "cowardly" killing of Soleimani had taken out the most effective commander in the battle against the Islamic State group.

In response, Iran launched a barrage of ballistic missiles targeting U.S. troops in Iraq, without causing serious injuries. Khamenei said the strike had dealt a "blow to America's image" as a superpower. In part of the sermon delivered in Arabic, he said the "real punishment" would be in forcing the U.S. to withdraw from the Middle East.

As Iran's Revolutionary Guard braced for an American counterattack that never came, it mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian jetliner shortly after it took off from Tehran's international airport, killing all 176 passengers on board, mostly Iranians.

Authorities concealed their role in the tragedy for three days, initially blaming the crash on a technical problem. Their admission of responsibility triggered days of street protests, which security forces dispersed with live ammunition and tear gas.

Khamenei called the shootdown of the plane a "bitter accident" that saddened Iran as much as it made its enemies happy. He said Iran's enemies had seized on the crash to question the Islamic Republic, the Revolutionary Guard, and the armed forces.

He also lashed out at Western countries, saying they are too weak to "bring Iranians to their knees." He said Britain, France, and Germany, which this week triggered a dispute mechanism to try and bring Iran back into compliance with the unraveling 2015 nuclear agreement, were "contemptible" governments and "servants" of the United States.

He said Iran was willing to negotiate, but not with the United States.

Khamenei has held the country's top office since 1989 and has the final say on all major decisions. The 80-year-old leader openly wept at the funeral of Soleimani and vowed "harsh retaliation" against the United States.

Thousands of people attended the Friday prayers, occasionally interrupting his speech by chanting "God is greatest!" and "Death to America!"

Tensions between Iran and the United States have steadily escalated since President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, which had imposed restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions.

The U.S. has since imposed crippling sanctions on Iran, including its vital oil and gas industry, pushing the country into an economic crisis that has ignited several waves of sporadic, leaderless protests. Trump has openly encouraged the protesters - even tweeting in Farsi - hoping that the protests and the sanctions will bring about a fundamental change in a longtime adversary.

After Soleimani was killed, Iran announced it would no longer be bound by the limitations in the nuclear agreement. European countries who have been trying to salvage the deal responded earlier this week by invoking a dispute mechanism that could result in even more sanctions.

Khamenei was always skeptical of the nuclear agreement, arguing that the United States could not be trusted. But he allowed President Hassan Rouhani, a relative moderate, to conclude the agreement with President Barack Obama. Since Trump's withdrawal, he has repeatedly said there can be no negotiations with the United States.

Khamenei last delivered a Friday sermon in February 2012, when he called Israel a "cancerous tumor" and vowed to support anyone confronting it.

01.16.20 – Th -

About 839 from the Holocaust are over age 100, with free monthly income & medical

01.16.20

Report: 14,800 Holocaust survivors pass away in 2019

Finance ministry says billions transferred to survivors in direct payments and benefits; about two-thirds of survivors receive only a few hundred shekels every month

Amir Alon | Published: 01.16.20 , 13:22

The Holocaust Survivors' Rights Authority at the Ministry of Finance published a report Wednesday, on the condition of Holocaust survivors and victims of anti-Semitic persecution during World War II living in Israel, which showed some 14,800 of them passed away in 2019.

According to the report, compiled ahead of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, there are some 192,000 people living in Israel who have been recognized as Holocaust survivors or victims of anti-Semitic persecution, including

Moroccan and Algerian Jews who lived under the French Vichy regime and survivors of the Farhud pogroms in Iraq.

About 74,000 (39%) of survivors are over the age of 85 and 839 are over the age of 100. About two-thirds of Holocaust survivors receive a monthly stipend of a few hundred shekels from the state.

The Authority said that over the past year, more than NIS 5 billion were transferred to survivors in direct payments or in the form of benefits.

About 59,000 survivors, who lived through the ghettos and concentration camps or lived under a false identity or in hiding, receive between NIS 2,420 (\$1800) and NIS 6,078 (\$700) in monthly payments.

Some 17,630 low-income survivors receive increased payments that could reach up to NIS 11,118 (\$3200) a month and a further 133,000 survivors are eligible for an extra yearly stipend, whose overall cost up to around NIS 604 million. Additionally, some 18,000 widows of Holocaust survivors also receive allowances.

Besides direct payments, survivors are also fully exempt from paying for medicine (estimated at a total cost of NIS 415 million), nursing services (NIS 439 million), medical treatment and medical equipment (NIS 132 million).

01.16.20 – Th -

Israel sees Gaza violence as Egypt increased tax & cost of products entering Gaza

01.16.20

Israel concerned over renewed violence on the Gaza border

Talks to advance long-term calm with Hamas stall after Egypt, incandescent over Haniyeh's visit to Tehran, began raising taxes and prices of goods crossing into Gaza from Rafah

Elior Levy | Updated: 01.16.20 , 11:39

Gaza factions are seeking to increase cross-border violence, as negotiations for a long-term understanding with Israel stall - a Hamas affiliated Gaza media outlet reported on Thursday.

The report emerges only a day after a salvo of four rockets was fired from the Gaza Strip at Israeli communities and an incendiary balloon was also sent across the border.

The rocket launches were attributed to an independent faction of the Islamic Jihad and came after three weeks of relative calm imposed by the ruling Hamas.

The IDF carried out strikes against Hamas targets in the northern part of the Strip in response to the rocket fire.

"The IDF regards the rocket attack from Gaza into Israel as grave and will continue to act against any attempt to harm Israeli civilians and considers the Hamas rulers responsible," the IDF Spokesperson's Unit said in a statement.

Security officials in Israel say they are concerned **Hamas allowed the attack** to take place in order to exert pressure on Israel and Egypt to resume talks with the terror group. The Egyptian government had committed to increasing imports from Gaza through the Rafah Crossing if calm on the border is maintained. Egypt canceled a planned visit by its negotiating delegation to Gaza after Haniyeh traveled to Tehran to attend the funeral of slain Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qassem Soleimani, though he had assured Egyptian intelligence officials he would not do so. Soleimani was killed in a U.S. airstrike earlier this month.

Following this visit, **Egypt began increasing the cost of products entering Gaza** across the Rafah border **including cooking gas**, which has caused shortages for Gazans. **Cairo also raised taxes on other products.**

01.15.20 – We -

Israeli military launches strikes in Gaza in response to rocket fire around 3:30 pm

01.15.20

Israeli military launches strikes in Gaza in response to rocket fire

The attacks come just hours after **4 projectiles** were fired at communities bordering the Hamas-controlled enclave; in the meantime, **a bundle of balloons with a suspicious device attached to it**, lands in Sderot

Matan Tzuri, Yoav Zitun | Published: **01.15.20** , 21:11

Israeli military on **Wednesday launched a series of air strikes in the Gaza** Strip in **response to rockets** fired by the Palestinian militants in the Hamas-controlled enclave hours earlier.

At least four projectiles were fired at Israeli border communities in the afternoon hours, with the Iron Dome missile defense system intercepting two of the rockets, the Israel Defense Forces said in a statement.

The army's spokesperson said among the sites that were targeted in the strike were a weapons production facility and a military compound belonging to Hamas. The military added that they've deployed additional Iron Dome batteries in cities and communities across southern Israel in anticipation of further rocket launches by "rouge" elements in the Strip.

The sirens sounded in Kibbutz Nahal Oz, Kibbutz Sa'ad and Kfar Aza, which are all within a short distance of the Gaza border, at **around 3:30 pm**. The rocket fire took place as local children were disembarking from buses at the end of the school day. In addition, the officials in Sderot said a bundle of balloons with suspicious devices attached to it, was located on one of the southern city's streets in the evening hours.