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02.18.20

Netanyahu challenges Gantz to a televised debate

Premier calls on rival to 'talk about the real issues'; Blue & White dismiss invitation as attempt to distract public from announcement of Netanyahu's corruption trial

Moran Azulay, Yuval Karni | Published: 02.18.20 , 23:43

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Tuesday on Blue & White Chairman Benny Gantz to a televised debate.

"I am ready to come here or somewhere else. We will speak to the public," Netanyahu said in an interview with Channel 20. "I don't have any teleprompters, let's talk about the real issues. What we have done and what we plan to do for the State of Israel. I invite you [Gantz] to a televised debate."

A Blue & White official dismissed the premier's challenge as an attempt to distract the public from his upcoming corruption trial, which was announced earlier Tuesday to open on March 17, two weeks after the general elections.

"This is a poor attempt to distract the public from the opening of his trial," said the official. "Netanyahu has been refusing to debate for ten years now and suddenly, the same day his trial was announced, he wants a debate. He'll have a debate with the prosecutor in court."

Commenting on Tuesday's announcement of Netanyahu's trial, Gantz called it a "sad day for the State of Israel."

"On March 17, his mandate will expire and his trial will begin. Netanyahu will only deal with himself, he will not be able to care for the citizens of the State of Israel," said Gantz. "As former IDF chief of staff, I know very well that the prime minister must dedicate all of his time to the most important issues of the state. He must be available, focused and free of personal interests. This is a sad day for the State of Israel and its citizens."

Earlier Tuesday the Justice Ministry announced Netanyahu's corruption trial will open on March 17 at 3 p.m., three weeks after Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit officially filed the indictments against Netanyahu at the Jerusalem District Court on three separate charges of corruption.

The move came just hours after Netanyahu, who was in Washington for the roll-out of U.S. President Donald Trump's Mideast peace plan, withdrew his request for parliamentary immunity from prosecution for charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

This is the first time in Israel's 71-year history that a sitting prime minister has been indicted. Olmert resigned before the charges, that ultimately led to a prison sentence, could be brought against him.

The indictments relate to three separate investigations, known as Cases 1000, 2000 and 4000 (Case 3000, which related to the purchase of German submarines by the Israeli Navy, did not lead to charges against the prime minister).

The most serious charges are connected to Case 4000 and include bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Netanyahu is accused of passing regulations that gave telecom magnate Shaul Elovitch benefits worth over \$250 million to his company Bezeq. In return, Bezeq's news site, Walla, published favorable articles about Netanyahu and his family. Shaul Elovitch and his wife Iris have also been charged with bribery.

Netanyahu is also charged with fraud and breach of trust in Case 2000, in which the prime minister and Yedioth Ahronoth and Ynet owner Arnon Mozes allegedly discussed mutual assistance to promote one another's interests during private meetings that began in 2009 and lasted for several years. Mozes has been charged with bribery over the affair.

Case 1000 also involves charges of fraud and breach of trust, in which Netanyahu's gifts of champagne from billionaires Arnon Milchan and James Packer turned into a sort of supply line.

The indictment said Netanyahu assisted the Israeli Hollywood mogul Milchan with extending his U.S. visa. It was not immediately clear what, if anything, Packer received in return.

02.18.20 – Tu -

IDF seeks director to oversee & develop new Iran-focused Defense branch

02.18.20

IDF to launch new Iran-focused directorate

New military branch is part of five-year plan for strengthening IDF's operational capabilities; plan envisions armed forces as more integrated and relying on advanced technological tools

Itay Blumenthal | Published: 02.18.20 , 22:10

The IDF on Tuesday announced “significant changes” to the makeup of its General Staff, including the wholesale creation of a new Iran-focused directorate and the restructuring of an existing department.

These changes — part of the military’s multi-year Momentum Plan — will go into effect this summer and has been approved by Defense Minister Naftali Bennett.

A commander of this new directorate — to be known as the Strategy and Iran Directorate — has not yet been chosen, though an appointment committee is set to convene soon. The actual formation of the unit will remain on hold until a superior officer is chosen. It was not immediately clear how large this new directorate will be. The directorate will focus not only on Israel’s efforts to counter Tehran's expansionist aspirations in the Middle East but also on the development of the military’s strategic and international relations.

As such, the IDF’s Liaison Unit, which maintains relations with foreign militaries, will be moved into this new directorate, along with the Planning Division. Currently, these two units are part of the IDF Planning Directorate.

The directorate will oversee counter actions against Iran only and not its proxies.

Currently, the issue of Iran is divided between various military branches such as Military Intelligence, the Operations Directorate, the Planning Directorate, and the Air Force among others.

The commander of the new Iran directorate will answer directly to the chief of staff.

As part of this restructuring, the Planning Directorate will be transformed and renamed the Force Design Directorate. It will be tasked with overseeing the development of new combat and weapons techniques, specifically in tactics and techniques that require

cooperation between various military branches — area to which Kochavi attributes great and growing importance.

Kochavi's Momentum Plan deals extensively with the Iranian issue, envisioning a far more integrated military.

This new Force Design Directorate will complement the current system, in which each branch of the military is responsible for developing and implementing its own tactics, allowing for techniques that use both air power and ground forces, for instance.

The commander of this directorate will also be able to work with the Defense Ministry and defense contractors to develop and acquire new weaponry and equipment.

Last week, Kochavi presented the main aspects of his Momentum Plan to the military's top officers. It is meant to serve as an overarching guide for the IDF's planning and development over the next five years, succeeding the five-year Gideon Plan created by Kochavi's predecessor, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot.

The plan calls for large-scale acquisitions of new missiles, drones, armored vehicles, air defense batteries, helicopters, and ships alongside the upgrading of existing equipment. It will not come cheap, requiring a significant budget increase — made yet more difficult by the lack of a fully functioning government.

The guiding principle of the Momentum Plan is to take full advantage of the areas in which the IDF has superiority over its enemies — air power, intelligence and technology — in order to ensure the Israeli army maintains a constant and significant edge over its foes, notably Iran and Hezbollah.

The military plans to use this superiority to achieve a swift and decisive victory in any future campaign, knowing that the longer a conflict drags on, the more the result will look like a loss, regardless of which side is victorious on the battlefield.

To do so, the IDF believes it must significantly improve its ability to identify enemy targets and strike as many as possible, as quickly as possible. Kochavi's plan will also involve improving the quality and quantity of equipment and weaponry and offer those capabilities to a larger number of troops through better communication and accessibility.

“Carrying out the multi-year Momentum Plan will allow the IDF to significantly increase its capabilities. The plan will increase the lethality of the IDF... [it] will create conditions to shorten the duration of a war,” Kochavi told top officers last week.

02.18.20 – Tu -

So long as quiet is preserved, Israel will expand Gaza fishing zone & add permits

02.18.20

Israel to expand Gaza fishing zone, add entry permits

Military liaison to the Palestinians says fresh set of leniencies coming into effect is contingent upon maintaining calm from recent days

Ynet| Published: 02.18.20 , 19:36

Israel will extend the fishing zone off the Gaza Strip back to 15 nautical miles from the coast and provide additional 2,000 entry permits from the Strip into Israel following a period of relative calm, according to a statement by the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) on Tuesday.

This fresh set of leniencies raises the total number of permits to an unprecedented 7,000. The decision lifts a new host of sanctions recently imposed on the coastal enclave following a period of heightened tensions, which included regular rocket fire and the launching of explosive devices into Israel using balloons.

The sanctions include restricting the permitted fishing zone down to 10 nautical miles and cutting some 500 entry permits for merchants into Israel from Gaza.

COGAT Maj. Gen. Kamil Abu Rukun said in a statement that these leniencies coming into effect is contingent upon maintaining the relative calm from recent days.

"So long as the quiet is preserved, Israel will act accordingly," Rukun said.

Despite a relatively silent period, an RPG warhead attached to a plastic bag was discovered earlier Tuesday in an orchard in Kibbutz Alumim in the Sdot Negev Regional Council, which borders the Gaza Strip.

Police sappers, who arrived at the scene, defused the device. There were no reports of casualties or damage.

It remains unclear when the warhead landed in the area and for how long it remained there before being spotted.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with local leaders of communities bordering the Gaza Strip, saying that launching a wide-scale operation in the Hamas-controlled enclave two weeks before the national elections would be difficult.

"Before the elections, it would be difficult to open a significant military campaign," Netanyahu was quoted as saying.

02.18.20 – Tu -

Netanyahu corruption trial to open on March 17 two weeks after general election

02.18.20

Netanyahu corruption trial to open on March 17

Trial scheduled to open two weeks after general election; justice who convicted former PM Olmert will lead judges' panel

Yael Freideson | Published: 02.18.20 , 16:35

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial will open on March 17 at 3 p.m., the Justice Ministry announced on Tuesday.

Last Wednesday, the District Court in Jerusalem announced the three-judge panel that will manage the judicial proceedings, led by Justice Rivkah Friedman-Feldman, alongside judges Moshe Bar-Am and Oded Shaham.

Friedman-Feldman served on the panel that convicted former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in the Talansky Affair retrial.

On January 28, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit filed the indictments against Netanyahu at the Jerusalem District Court on three separate charges of corruption. The move came just hours after **Netanyahu**, who was in Washington for the roll-out of U.S. President Donald Trump's Mideast peace plan, **withdrew** his **request for** parliamentary **immunity** from prosecution for charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

This is the first time in Israel's 71-year history that a sitting prime minister has been indicted. Olmert resigned before the charges, that ultimately led to a prison sentence, could be brought against him.

The indictments relate to three separate investigations, known as Cases 1000, 2000 and 4000 (Case 3000, which related to the purchase of German submarines by the Israeli Navy, did not lead to charges against the prime minister).

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Netanyahu is also charged with fraud and breach of trust in Case 2000, in which the prime minister and Yedioth Ahronoth and Ynet owner Arnon Mozes allegedly discussed mutual assistance to promote one another's interests during private meetings that began in 2009 and lasted for several years. Mozes has been charged with bribery over the affair. Case 1000 also involves charges of fraud and breach of trust, in which Netanyahu's gifts of champagne from billionaires Arnon Milchan and James Packer turned into a sort of supply line.

The **indictment said** **Netanyahu assisted the Israeli Hollywood mogul Milchan** with **extending his U.S. visa**. It was not immediately clear what, if anything, Packer received in return.

02.18.20 – Tu -

Gantz election favors US Democrat Party; Netanyahu exclusive to Trump Republic

02.18.20

Gantz pledges to mend ties with Democrats if elected

Blue & White leader tell a mostly English-speaking crowd in Tel Aviv his party will **'rehabilitate' Israel's ties with the Democratic Party and the American Jewry** following years of Netanyahu's neglect for bipartisan ties

Associated Press| Published: **02.18.20** , 11:47

Blue & White leader Benny Gantz said on Monday that if he becomes prime minister after the country's third national elections in less than a year next month, he would work to mend ties with the Democratic Party in the United States.

The former army chief of staff accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of neglecting bipartisan ties in favor of exclusive support from President Donald Trump's Republican Party.

Netanyahu has heavily emphasized his relationship with Trump in the past year of electioneering, and has drawn criticism for alienating Democrats in the process. Both Gantz and Netanyahu have called for bipartisan support for Israel in the United States. Gantz, who leads the centrist party, said it was "very important that we emphasize the importance of bipartisan relationship between Israel and the United States." "We don't care if the American president is a Republican or Democrat," Gantz said. "If he is a good president for the United States," then that person would be a "good president for the State of Israel as well."

Gantz and his running mate Yair Lapid addressed a crowd of around 1,000 mostly English speakers at an event in Tel Aviv. Lapid said that Israel faces the task of a "rehabilitation" of ties with the Democrats and with American Jewry in general. Gantz is trying to unseat Netanyahu in the March 2 vote - Israel's third consecutive parliamentary vote after two elections in 2019 failed to yield a conclusive result. Netanyahu, Israel's longest serving prime minister, seeks reelection while facing indictments on corruption charges. He has denied any wrongdoing.

Pre-election polls indicate that neither Gantz nor Netanyahu has a clear path to a parliamentary majority.

02.18.20 – Tu -

Coronavirus death toll 1,789 in Hubei & 79 outside province, of 72,436 cases

02.18.20

In bid to curb coronavirus, Israel extends entry ban to East Asia locations

Non-nationals who have spent any time in past two weeks in Macau, Singapore, Hong Kong or Thailand will be denied entry, in line with Health Ministry recommendations; similar measures also taken for visitors to China, where virus originated

Ynet| Published: 02.18.20 , 08:37

Israel has banned the entry of non-nationals who have visited the East Asian locations of Thailand, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore and Hong Kong in the past two weeks, Interior Minister Aryeh Deri announced Monday, in an attempt to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

The step comes at the recommendation of the Health Ministry and is similar to a ban on arrivals from China.

The virus has killed another 98 people in mainland China in the past day, bringing the total death toll to 1,868. Daily new cases in the country rose by 1,886 to a total of 72,436. The number of new daily infections in mainland China had not been below 2,000 since Jan. 30, while the daily death toll had not come under 100 since Feb. 11. In Hubei province, number of deaths rose by 93 to 1,789. An additional 1,807 cases were detected, taking the total in the province to 59,989.

The head of a leading hospital in Wuhan died of the disease, state television said, becoming the second prominent Chinese doctor to have succumbed to the pathogen.

“Liu Zhiming, the director of Wuhan Wuchang hospital, died at 10.30am this morning after resuscitation efforts failed,” China Central Television said Tuesday.

Outside of China, there are 827 cases in 26 countries and regions, and five deaths.

Meanwhile, Israel is preparing for the return of its nationals currently quarantined aboard a coronavirus-struck cruise ship in quarantine in a Japanese port.

So far, three of the 15 Israeli passengers have been diagnosed with the virus as their families demand their release from the quarantine that they termed a medical

"experiment." The three Israelis who have been infected will remain hospitalized in Japan.

Health Ministry Deputy Director-General Prof. Itamar Grotto, who is in Japan, said Monday morning that he is working to have the 12 released from the Diamond Princess cruise liner before the quarantine period ends later this week.

Their release from the ship depends on whether the passengers get the results of health checks by Wednesday.

If released, they will be transferred from Yokohama Port where the ship is docked to the airport, where they will board a direct flight to Israel. Upon arrival in the country, they will be required to spend up to 14 days in isolation.

There are 454 people on board the Diamond Princess, which currently has some 3,700 passengers and crew. The number of infected has grown by 99 since Sunday.

On Sunday night, the American passengers were evacuated; 14 of them have been infected.

Yonatan Levy, a relative of one of the Israeli passengers now infected told Ynet that she had been taken to a coastal hospital, along with the Israeli couple previously diagnosed with the virus.

"They say that they are in good health, that the health services are not overwhelmed. She has no symptoms except perhaps light sniffles, although we have not really had chance to speak. Although she is an older woman, she is a very strong woman and I am certain she will come out of this," said Levy, whose mother, sister and other family members were on board the ship.

"As early as the second day of quarantine we told them that what they were doing was dangerous," he said. "We need to assume that the entire ship has been infected via the

ventilation system. We have to evacuate all of them, like the Americans did: Three hundred and eighty people were all evacuated. Boom," he said.

"One has to assume that if they have been on the ship for 14 days on top of another 15 days of cruising, the chances are that everyone is infected. America did it for 400 passengers, we only have 15. "

02.18.20 – Tu -

Quarantine on cruise ship in Japan ends Wednesday for 3,711 passengers and crew

02.18.20

Quarantine on cruise ship in Japan 'incubator' for coronavirus

Japanese authorities defend effectiveness of strict guidelines on coronavirus-hit cruise; some passengers, crew members to go through second quarantine period

Associated Press | Published: 02.18.20 , 20:03

An extraordinary two-week quarantine of the Diamond Princess cruise ship is set to end Wednesday, with thousands of passengers and crew set to disembark over the next several days in the port of Yokohama, near Tokyo.

A growing number of scientists, however, say the ship served as an incubator for a worrying new virus from China instead of a quarantine facility meant to prevent the worsening of an outbreak that has sickened tens of thousands.

As of Tuesday, 542 cases of the virus have been identified among the 3,711 quarantined passengers and crew, making the ship the site with the most infections outside of China. The Japanese government has repeatedly defended the effectiveness of the quarantine, but some scientists suggest that it may have been less than rigorous.

In a possible sign of lax quarantine protocols, three Japanese health officials who helped in the quarantine checks on the ship were also infected.

"I suspect people were not as isolated from other people as we would have thought," said Dr. Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia in England.

Japanese Health Minister Katsunobu Kato told reporters Tuesday that all passengers who remained on the cruise ship have had their samples taken and that those who tested negative would start getting off the vessel beginning Wednesday, when their required 14-day quarantine is scheduled to end.

"They all want to go home as early as possible, and we hope to assist them so that everyone can get home smoothly," Kato said.

The process is expected to take until Friday due to the large number of people involved. "Obviously, the quarantine hasn't worked, and this ship has now become a source of infection," said Dr. Nathalie MacDermott, an outbreak expert at King's College London. She said the exact mechanism of the virus' spread was unknown.

“We need to understand how the quarantine measures on board were implemented, what the air filtration on board is like, how the cabins are connected and how waste products are disposed of,” MacDermott said.

“There could also be another mode of transmission we’re not familiar with,” she said, noting the possibility of environmental spread and the importance of “deep-cleaning” the entire ship to prevent people from touching contaminated surfaces.

During the 2002-2003 outbreak of SARS, a related virus, experts discovered that more than 300 people were infected through a defective sewage system in a Hong Kong housing estate. MacDermott said it was possible there was a similar issue aboard the Diamond Princess, but that a full investigation was needed.

“There’s no reason this should not have worked if it had been done properly,” she said. Some passengers on the Diamond Princess described the ship as a “floating prison” but were allowed to walk on the decks every day while wearing a mask and were told to keep their distance from others.

Prof. Hunter said the continued spread of the virus could be due to compliance problems. “It’s difficult to enforce a quarantine in a ship environment and I’m absolutely sure there were some passengers who think they’re not going to let anyone tell them what they can and cannot do,” he said.

Hunter said it was “a huge disappointment” that the quarantine hadn’t curbed the spread of the virus and that it was unfortunate some passengers returning to their home countries would now face another period of isolation.

“Given how the virus has continued to spread, we have to presume everyone leaving the ship is potentially infected, and therefore they have to go through another two-week quarantine period,” he said. “Not to do so would be reckless.”

Japanese health officials say a 14-day quarantine on the ship is adequate, citing results that all but one of more than 500 Japanese returnees from Wuhan, the epicenter of the virus in China, who initially tested negative were also found to be virus-free at the end of their 14-day quarantine at government facilities.

Those officials also have defended precautions taken on the ship. About 1,000 crew members were told to wear surgical masks, wash their hands, use disinfectant sprays and stop operations at restaurants, bars and other entertainment areas after Feb. 5, when the first group of 10 infected people was reported and the official start of the 14-day quarantine was announced.

Dr. Michael Ryan, the chief of emergencies at the World Health Organization, said earlier this month that the agency was working with Japanese officials to help passengers get off the ship as soon as possible.

“It’s really important that there’s an appropriate risk management approach being taken here,” he said last week. He reminded countries of their obligations to respect the human rights of travelers and said they were working to ensure that “we don’t end up with an unfortunate consequence of people having to stay too long in that situation.”

Passengers were instructed to stay in their cabins and not walk around or contact other passengers. Those in windowless cabins could go out on the deck to take a walk or exercise for about an hour each day.

The two-week quarantine was largely for the passengers, because crew members kept sharing double rooms with their colleagues, and they continued to serve the guests by delivering food, letters, towels and amenities, and entering passenger cabins for cleaning. Crew members also cooked their own food and ate in groups in a crew mess hall.

“Unlike passengers, crew members share their rooms, they share food, and that’s why some of them are infected even after the quarantine started,” Shigeru Omi, a former regional director for the World Health Organization, said at a recent news conference. Omi said quarantine is one of the measures considered effective early on, but the virus has already made its way into local communities across Japan, where untraceable cases have been popping up already, he said.

At this stage, “the spreading of the virus will be inevitable, and that’s why quarantine is out of the question,” Omi said.

He said the focus now should shift from border control to preventing the spread in local communities.

Other scientists said that passengers should have been removed from the boat from the beginning.

“Boats are notorious places for being incubators for viruses,” said Arthur Caplan, a professor of bioethics at the New York University School of Medicine. “It’s only morally justified to keep people on the boat if there are no other options.”

Caplan said that a second quarantine was justified, but that officials had done a poor job of explaining from the outset what would happen if their original plan failed.

“It’s never good to lose your civil liberties and your rights of movement, but two more weeks of quarantine is not an undue burden if you’re trying to protect spread of a disease,” he said.

02.18.20 – Tu -

Syria & Russia troops & planes force last rebels toward Turkish border

02.18.20

UN: Air strikes hit hospitals, camps in northwest Syria, relief effort overwhelmed
Refugee wave largest since WWII; aid groups report children freezing to death in camps;
reports of further military achievements for Assad en route to victory
Reuters| Published: 02.18.20 , 17:27

Government airstrikes have hit hospitals and displaced persons' camps in northwest Syria and killed about 300 civilians as President Bashar al-Assad's forces press an assault against the last rebel stronghold, the United Nations said on Tuesday.

UN officials said relief agencies were overwhelmed by the humanitarian crisis as nearly one million civilians, most of them women and children, had fled towards the Turkish border in bitter winter conditions to escape the onslaught.

"Civilians fleeing the fighting are being squeezed into areas without safe shelter that is shrinking in size by the hour. And still, they are bombed. They simply have nowhere to go," UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said in a statement.

Syrian and Russian warplanes meanwhile kept up raids on the town of Darat Izza in Aleppo province on Tuesday, witnesses said, one day after two hospitals there were badly damaged.

At Al Kinana Hospital, blown-out walls and dust-covered medical cables and supplies were strewn about the hospital after two staff were wounded on Monday, witnesses said.

Appearing on national television on Monday, Assad said the rapid military gains presaged the eventual defeat of the nine-year-old insurgency against him although it could still take time. The rebel factions include Turkish-backed rebels and jihadist militants.

The offensive has also disrupted fragile cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, who back opposing factions in the war. They began a new round of talks in Moscow on Monday after demands by Ankara that the Syrian army should back down and a ceasefire be put in place.

POSSIBLE WAR CRIMES

UN human rights spokesman Rupert Colville, asked if Syria and its ally Russia were deliberately targeting civilians and protected buildings, said: "The sheer quantity of attacks on hospitals, medical facilities, and schools would suggest they cannot all be accidental."

The attacks could constitute war crimes, Colville told a briefing in Geneva.

The UN human rights office said it had recorded 299 civilian deaths since Jan. 1, about 93% caused by the Syrian government and its allies.

The swift advance of government troops, backed by Russian airstrikes, through northwest Syria has also caused the biggest displacement of the war as people flee towards a shrinking pocket near the Turkish frontier where insurgents hold their last strongholds.

A UN spokesman, David Swanson, said close to 900,000 people have fled conflict zones in Idlib province and western Aleppo since December, more than 80% women and children, largest exodus of civilians since World War II.

Many have been unable to find shelter and are forced to sleep outside in freezing temperatures and burn plastic to stay warm, risking disease and death.

"Only half of all the health facilities in the northwest are still functioning now," Swanson said.

Hurras Network, a Save the Children partner in Idlib, said seven children including a seven-month-old baby had died from freezing temperatures and bleak conditions in displaced persons' camps.

The Syrian army said on Monday it had taken full control of dozens of towns in the Aleppo countryside.

The M5 highway linking Damascus to Aleppo, the focus of recent fighting, was re-opened to civilian traffic on Tuesday after government forces recaptured it last week, the Syrian Observatory war monitor reported.

The opposition also said airstrikes in southern areas of Idlib province had left dozens of towns and villages in ruins in what it called a "scorched earth policy." Alarmed by the new refugee crisis on its border, Turkey has sent thousands of troops and hundreds of convoys of military equipment to reinforce its observation posts in Idlib, established under a 2018 de-escalation agreement with Russia.

Trucks carrying aid supplies still cross from Turkey into northern Syria in a UN relief operation, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said on Tuesday.

About 525,000 displaced children are among those trapped, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said.

02.17.20 – Mo -

US sanctions cripple Iran; Parliament vote this week & none has a plan for anything

02.17.20

Disgruntled Iranians say they'll boycott Parliamentary vote

Many Iranians suffer from the current economic situation, outraged at their government and fearing a military confrontation with the U.S.; they have lost confidence in politics; this Friday, with the Islamic Republic heading to the polls, they will remain at home
AFP| Published: 02.17.20 , 22:02

Many Iranians, battered by economic sanctions, political turmoil and the lingering threat of military conflict, say they are in no mood to vote in general elections this week.

Speaking of heavy hearts and a sense of bitterness, Tehranis complain they are tired of politicians who have failed to keep their word or to raise living standards.

"No way! There's no way we are going to vote!" 62-year-old Pari said under the gaze of her daughter who also intends to boycott the parliamentary polls Friday because she no longer trusts politicians.

"It's difficult for everyone in Iran nowadays. We're fed up. We want to send a message that we're not satisfied with the situation," the mother added.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, re-elected in 2017, promised more social and individual freedoms and gave assurances that Iranians would be able to benefit from the fruits of engagement with the West.

But many people feel their lives have been crippled by the economic slump and exacerbated by harsh U.S. sanctions since American President Donald Trump in 2018 pulled out of a landmark nuclear deal with Iran.

Added to this has been the threat of military conflict as Trump has ramped up a campaign of "maximum pressure" against the Islamic republic.

Pari and her daughter Kiana were strolling through Tajrish, one of the capital's most exclusive neighborhoods where displays of wealth contrast sharply with extreme poverty. Elegant women in dark glasses steered their SUVs through streets lined with roadside vendors who displayed their wares on the grimy pavement.

A shoeshine boy sitting on the curb of the icy sidewalk was narrowly missed by a motorcycle online food delivery rider speeding the wrong way up a traffic-choked street. "There's no work, no future," said Kiana, her jet-black hair falling out from under her headscarf.

Above all, she said, she no longer "trusts the authorities" and is dismayed by their "lack of honesty".

The credibility of Iran's leaders took a hit among many when authorities denied last month that Iranian armed forces had mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian airliner, before they came clean days later.

Crippled lives

At Tehran's Grand Bazaar, beyond the stunning turquoise-blue mosaic entrance, hundreds of people scrambled into the historic market, a labyrinth of alleys and shops underneath stone vaulted ceilings.

Browsing for brass dishware, linen bedding, refined carpets and clothes, shoppers elbowed their way through the crowd.

Standing at the entrance was Amir Mohtasham, a 38-year-old who has been jobless for two years and who said he worries about the "lack of vision of those candidates" allowed to stand for elections.

"It seems none of the candidates has a plan for anything," he said.

"Neither the conservatives nor the reformists are trustworthy. They only care about votes... Our elections are useless."

A short distance away, a 30-year-old carpet merchant, though much better off, voiced similar views.

"We voted for Rouhani with a dream, but we didn't achieve anything," Mohammad said, accusing the authorities of spreading "lies".

"People no longer have peace of mind," he said. "When the people aren't the ones who decide, why should we vote? If voting is legitimizing, then we won't vote."

Other people from conservative or religious backgrounds, however, said they were determined to take part in the election.

"I will certainly vote, but I need to think about for whom," said Hassan Ghole, 55, a bazaar salesman.

"Our parliamentarians are all trying to do their best but how much they can actually succeed, nobody knows," he said, expressing hope that future lawmakers would work "to solve the problems of youths".

'Voice our protest'

In Tehran's poorer southern district of Nazi Abad, a housewife wearing a chador also said she would dutifully cast her ballot.

"From the point of view of our religion, it's important to go and vote, especially as our country is surrounded by enemies," she said.

"The most important thing for us is to have faith in life and then the economy will be good."

But in the same neighborhood, youths spoke of their thirst for more freedom in the Islamic republic, which marked its 41st anniversary this month.

"Elections have just become symbolic... I don't support this system and won't vote," 20-year-old Kamran Baluchzadeh said, in a rare show of dissent.

"I feel hopeless and weak, and I'm even not 25 years old," he said, shivering in below-freezing temperatures.

"I feel desperate," he added, citing expenses he can't pay, worries about being unable to find a wife and taking care of his parents.

Bags of clothing and a telephone in hand, Pari Aghazadeh is a fashion designer who does not go unnoticed with her slender figure, redone nose, false nails and a thick coat of lipstick.

"I honestly don't want to vote, because it won't fix our problems," she said, accusing the government of mismanagement.

"This government, this system doesn't care at all about women. We don't have any personal freedoms," she said.

At least by boycotting the vote, she said, "we can voice our protest".