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**To: Ye hoshua Othniel**  
**Take a special note on the virus control.**  
**In a world wide perspective, no one has any concern that Israel is isolated.**

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Knesset at impasse as major factions bicker on committees

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New coronavirus guidelines threaten to hamper parliamentary work; Likud demand minimum numbers to stay in line with precautions; Blue & White accuse them of 'power grab'

Moran Azulay | Published: 03.17.20 , 19:46

Tuesday's meeting at Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein's office regarding the convening of the parliament's various committees ended in a shouting match between Blue & White and Likud members.

The vocal disagreement rose from Likud's demand for equal representation in all assemblies in accordance with the Health Ministry directive banning more than ten people from being represented in a single room which is meant to curb the spread of coronavirus.

Blue & White refused the request due to the creeping MK majority coalescing around Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – and instead proposed the meetings will take place in a spacious auditorium where each member will have enough personal distance from his colleague.

Furthermore, Blue & White suggested that the meetings will consist of ten MKs only, with the rest of the committee's members joining via video link, as the cabinet meetings had convened over the past few days.

Despite the loud exchange of words, no final agreement was reached.

Blue & White warned Edelstein, that if he does not allow the assembly of the Knesset committee which much decide on committees' leadership and schedule, they will bring the matter to a plenum vote on Wednesday, where it is expected they will have majority support.

Edelstein, who has been criticized lately for his reluctance to allow a vote on his replacement, announced that if there is no agreement he will bring the matter before the plenum.

Blue & White chairman Benny Gantz said that “Likud... is trying to prevent the work of the Knesset. If it isn't enough that the Knesset hasn't functioned for a full year, now they also want the new Knesset to do the minimum required work in a time of crisis.”

“The moves by Likud are a dangerous precedent for democracy and we'll fight this with all the strength we can muster,” he added.

“It could be that it doesn’t really interest you with all the coronavirus in the air, but as of today you’re not living in a democracy,” Yair Lapid, a member of the Blue & White leadership, wrote on Facebook in response to the impasse.

The speaker of the last Knesset [Yuli Edelstein], who wasn’t elected to his post, closed the Knesset. Before that he refused a request of a majority of Knesset members — 62 in total — to choose a new Knesset speaker,” he added.

Likud MK Miki Zohar said it’s Blue & White that is to blame.

“Blue & White is again trying to break the rules of the Knesset. They’re behaving brutally and are disconnected from reality out of their hatred for the prime minister,” he tweeted.

Zohar claimed Likud offered to establish 10 Knesset committees but Blue & White refused.

03.17.20 – Tu -

Modi’in neighborhood at risk of full closure due to coronavirus

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Modi’in neighborhood at risk of full closure due to coronavirus

The rise in confirmed cases and the growing number of quarantined residents indicate the neighborhood could be top of the list for full closure in an effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus but the mayor is still reluctant to take the extreme step

Yael Freidson, Roy Rubinstein | Updated: 03.17.20 , 19:07

A Neighborhood in Modi’in could be completely quarantined due to coronavirus

With a quarter of its residents in quarantine, the Avnei Chen neighborhood in Modi’in might be the first place in Israel to be completely closed off.

Health Minister Yaakov Litzman said that the Ultra-Orthodox town Kiryat Ye'arim, near Jerusalem, may also be quarantined after six more cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed there, bringing the total to 14 confirmed cases out of 1,500 residents in quarantine.

On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s said areas most affected by the coronavirus may have to be isolated for a period of time from the rest of the country in order to control the spread of the disease.

The number of confirmed coronavirus patients in the Modi’in neighborhood is rising rapidly, with ten cases already confirmed, and 3,000 out of the 12 thousand residents of the city in quarantine under precautionary measures.

Modi’in’s Mayor, Haim Bibas, decided on Tuesday that despite concerns, he will hold off isolating the area completely for now, although the decision could change.

Bibas instructed special preparations to be put in place in the affected area, including an increased presence of the city’s police force and a decontamination of public spaces.

The mayor also instructed residents to remain indoors, avoid public gatherings and refrain from any unnecessary contact with others.

On Tuesday the Modi'in municipality announced the Ministry of Health informed them that a student from the Drayeh Yehuda school in the neighborhood had been confirmed to have been infected with the coronavirus. As a result, the ministry announced that all 650 students and 70 staff members of the school are to quarantine themselves for a period of 14 days.

Students and staff members of two other schools in the neighborhood were also told to begin a period of quarantine after the two schools celebrated the Purim holiday together. Worshipers at two synagogues in the neighborhood were also instructed to stay in quarantine.

In a statement published on Tuesday, the Modi'in municipality said, "we will continue to be in full contact with the Health Ministry along with other relevant factors to the situation in order to update our resident with the latest instructions, in the meantime, the municipality is working in order to ensure the well-being of those in quarantine."

First published: 19:00 , 03.17.20

03.17.20 – Tu -

Public Transportation halts on evenings and weekends due to coronavirus

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In an effort to stop the spread of coronavirus, lines will be halted to entertainment hubs, universities and other non-essential destinations as the Transportation Ministry increases government efforts to limit the movement of Israelis who are now asked to stay home

Asaf Zagrzek, Sivan Hilaie | Updated: 03.17.20 , 17:23

Public transportation will be scaled back as part of the government's efforts to slow down the spread of coronavirus with suspension of buses and trains at night and over the weekend.

The Transportation Ministry announced it is suspending all public transport as of 10 PM On Tuesday and every evening thereafter, to be resumed in the early morning hours on weekdays.

Weekend transport will be halted from Thursday at eight PM and will resume early morning on Sunday.

The ministry is monitoring the needs of people to get to places of vital work, food shopping, and medical care but will halt lines to entertainment areas, universities and other non-essential destinations.

"We are motivated by the need to protect public health," said Transportation Minister Bezalel Smotrich, "we are doing all we can to minimize disruption to the public and I am appealing to everyone to avoid boarding busses and trans and follow the Health Ministry guidelines."

There has already been a decline of up to 50% in the use of public transportation and officials believe more people will refrain from using the service.

Transportation companies and bus drivers were called to adhere to the guidelines, restrict the number of passengers, maintain a two-meter space between people and attempt to keep their close environment as sterile as possible.

03.17.20 – Tu -

IDF soldiers arrested in plot to steal army weapons

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IDF soldiers arrested in plot to steal army weapons

6 troops are among 21 people, most from same extended family, arrested following three-month undercover investigation into the theft of munitions that were replaced with malfunctioning fakes

ilana curiel | Published: 03.17.20 , 13:46

Twenty-one people - including six IDF soldiers - have been arrested for involvement in a plot to smuggle weapons and ammunition, following an investigation by the military police and the Shin Bet security service.

The six soldiers are stationed at a transportation base in the south; two newly demobbed soldiers were also detained.

Many of the detainees are members of the same extended Bedouin family from the Negev. Two Palestinian residents of Hebron were also arrested, along with a number of Israeli citizens.

According to the investigation revealed Monday, weapons and ammunition were stolen from military bases and replaced by forged equipment that then malfunctioned. The alleged plot took advantage of the soldiers' roles as drivers as well as their access to arms depots.

Some of the stolen arms were allegedly sold to criminal elements in the Negev and others were said to have been transported into Palestinian Authority territory.

The military police began investigating the case in 2019 following reports of malfunctioning weapons. The military police officers were able to trace the incidents to the time the soldiers were on hand to replace parts and transport military equipment out of the base.

An attempt to smuggle 4,000 bullets into the West Bank, which was uncovered by police in December, led investigators to the suspected soldiers and helped advance the investigation.

After three months of undercover investigation, some attempts to smuggle weapons were halted, although not all of these efforts were successful.

The soldiers told investigators that they had received NIS 1.5 for every bullet they stole and NIS 3,000-5,000 for a gun barrel.

One of the detained soldiers is believed to be at the center of the alleged conspiracy. No connection to any terrorist group has been established, the authorities said. Four indictments were handed down Monday and more are expected.

The police said: "We are continuing in our efforts to fight the illegal arms trade and are using all tools at our disposal in cooperation with other law enforcement authorities, to remove criminals from the public sphere and ensure the safety of citizens."

03.16.20 – Mo -

Netanyahu announces further restrictions on economy to fight coronavirus

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New measures demand both public and private sectors to place most of staff on leave; no general lockdown of country, only areas with high contagion rates; public transport will continue, changes to be announced

Ynet| Published: 03.16.20 , 22:25

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced in a televised statement on Monday a set of new restrictions on the economy aimed at fighting the coronavirus.

The government will approve emergency regulations that will allow authorities to use digital means to track down the location of patients.

Netanyahu said that such an act would only be valid for 30 days to protect individual rights.

The public sector will operate in a reduced "emergency format" and up to 80% of staff will be placed on paid leave until after the Passover holiday.

Private firms will also have to leave 70% of their workforce at home. The Health Ministry will allow certain industries to maintain a wider workforce

Essential services such as supermarkets, banks, health facilities, etc. will stay open. Public transportation will continue, but with some changes. The premier did not specify what those details will be, but they will be announced on the Transportation Ministry's website.

Netanyahu also said that Israel will not impose a general lockdown for the time being, but may close off specific areas with a large number of cases of the pathogen.

These new directives join a series of emergency **regulations approved on Sunday** by the government to deal with the outbreak of the coronavirus, among them a NIS 5000 (roughly \$1,360) **fine** for individuals who are found **violating quarantine**. According to the regulations, police and local authorities can impose administrative fines on individuals who violate quarantine or the Health Ministry's guideline that **forbid mass gatherings**.

A NIS 5,000 **fine** will be imposed for **violating isolation obligation** and **leaving quarantine prematurely**.

A NIS 3,000 **fine** will be imposed for **failing to report to the Health Ministry about entering quarantine** or failing to **report arrival from abroad**.

A NIS 5,000 **fine** will be imposed for **violating a police officer's order to disperse** a mass gathering.

**03.16.20** – Mo -

**Health Ministry mulling home confinement for all against coronavirus**

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**Health Ministry mulling home confinement for all against coronavirus**

Health officials mull mounting additional restrictions on public as further coronavirus cases emerge; public transportation to be cut down; general shutdown of economy not planned 'for the time being'

Ynet| Updated: **03.16.20** , 19:14

The Health Ministry is considering imposing more strict restrictions on movement as part of the measures to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, the ministry's deputy director general Itamar Grotto said on Monday.

"We may ask people to leave the house less, and only for necessary errands," Grotto said. "The government is considering a general closure on all citizens, and if that happens it would mean all age groups will be asked to stay home until further notice."

Grotto also said the ministry was "planning greater oversight for the 70+ population," which is at risk.

"We're preparing now for hospitals to be able to hold the corona patients who will need treatment, and most of the less urgent patients will be hospitalized at home unless impossible due to socioeconomic or familial reasons."

Grotto's announcement came after the ministry's upper echelons ran further discussions over the implementation of increasingly drastic measures to limit contact with the virus and slow its spread.

"For the time being, a general shutdown of the economy isn't planned," a senior official told reporters on Monday, but, added that, "the government is preparing to cut back on public transportation."

The government approved on Sunday a series of emergency regulations to deal with the outbreak of the coronavirus, among them a NIS 5000 (roughly \$1,360) fine for individuals who are found violating quarantine.

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Additional steps were approved to prevent the spread of the pathogen in prisons. Among them, the reassignment of incarceration facilities as quarantine compounds for prisoners.

03.16.20 – Mo -

**Indian Israeli beaten in Tiberias for 'causing coronavirus'**

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**Indian Israeli beaten in Tiberias for 'causing coronavirus'**

Am-Shalem Singson, a member of the Bnei Menashe community, suffers severe chest injuries when pushed to ground and kicked repeatedly by assailants shouting 'Corona! Corona!'

Ahiya Raved | Published: 03.16.20 , 13:07

Am-Shalem Singson, a 28-year immigrant from the Bnei Menashe community in Manipur, India, was attacked Saturday in Tiberias by unknown assailants who thought he was Chinese and blamed him for the coronavirus outbreak.

The assailants shoved Singson to the ground and kicked him repeatedly while screaming "corona corona."



Singson was admitted to the city's Poriya Medical Center with severe chest injuries following the attack.

"I tried to explain to the two attackers I wasn't Chinese, but a Jew from the Bnei Menashe community," says Singson who immigrated to Israel in 2017.

"There is no justification to attack someone for being Chinese or anyone else for that matter, but they were in a state of total madness while kicking me."

Singson, who lives in Tiberias with his mother, grandmother and brother, is a student at a yeshiva program that combines Talmudic studies with military service.

The police said that he was being investigated, adding that "at this stage we are mainly gathering information regarding the assailants."

"We were shocked to receive the reports of the racist attack against Am-Shalem Singson on Saturday in Tiberias," said Michael Freund, the founder and chairman of Shavei Israel, an organization dedicated to helping Jewish communities around the world immigrate to Israel.

"The Bnei Menashe are our brothers and sisters," Freund said. "Coronavirus does not differentiate between people based on their skin color, facial structure or eye shape.

"I demand that the Israeli police force investigate this matter with total urgency in order to bring those responsible to justice."

Israel's Racism Crisis Center, an organization dedicated to help those experiencing discrimination, said: "The aggravated assault on Am-Shalem Singson warrants a thorough police investigation to properly find and punish the offenders.

"In past plagues it was the Jews who were wrongfully accused of spreading the disease; let us learn a humane lesson from the past."

More than 4,000 immigrants from the Bnei Menashe community (an ethnolinguistic group in India who claim descent from one of the Lost Tribes of Israel and have adopted the practice of Judaism) have already made aliyah, with an additional 6,500 more awaiting to receive permission.

03.14.20 – Sa -

Netanyahu announces closure of shops, restaurants to fight coronavirus

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Netanyahu announces closure of shops, restaurants to fight coronavirus

PM says supermarkets, pharmacies and gas stations will remain open; adds anyone who doesn't require to leave house, should stay indoors; keep 2 meters (6.5 feet) distance from others; no gatherings with more than 10 people

Ynet| Published: 03.14.20 , 21:41

Israel will shut most shopping centers, restaurants, cafes and entertainment facilities for at least five weeks as part of measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Saturday.

The move - which essentially shuts down most of country's business activity - was announced by Netanyahu in a special press conference where a series of drastic steps meant to fight the spread of COVID-19 were presented, as number of coronavirus cases in Israel nears 200.

He told the news conference that exceptions on the ban would include supermarkets, pharmacies and gas stations.

Netanyahu kicked off by saying he had received a permission from Justice Ministry to obtain digital data on confirmed coronavirus patients in order to retrace their whereabouts. "The enemy is invisible and we want to locate it, he said, "First of all, we have to identify the ill and we are using everything at our disposal, including digital means that we have to fight against terrorism," he added.

The move would help trace a potential spread of the disease without the Health Ministry having to conduct epidemiological investigations, which are not always accurate.

The prime minister also said anyone who is not required to physically be at their place of work to say home. In the event people need to leave their house, they must keep the distance of at least 2 meters (6.5 feet) from others.

Siegal Sadetzki, Head, Cancer & Radiation Epidemiology Unit at The Gertner Institute, also spoke at the news conference and said the directive to limit public gathering has been tightened.

"We ask for there not to be no more than ten people in one space, and they also have the obligation to keep 2 meters away from each other," she said.

In addition, it was also announced the limited operations of various modes of public transportation and the public was urged to think twice before using public transport. Nevertheless, so far there is no limit on a number of passengers allowed on busses or train.

Furthermore, the closure of the education sector, which so far included schools and universities, will be extended to kindergartens, special education and boarding schools.

Israeli military has also tightened its guidelines for the soldiers, with the army calling on all troops away for the weekend to return on Sunday morning to their bases and be prepared for a month-long stay away from home.

03.14.20 – Sa -

Israel to shut down most business activity for 5 weeks to combat coronavirus

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**Israel to shut down most business activity for 5 weeks to combat coronavirus**

Netanyahu set to announce a series of drastic steps meant to fight spread of COVID-19, which include closure of all 'non-essential' workplaces; supermarkets, pharmacies to stay open

Ynet| Published: 03.14.20 , 18:40

Israel is set to essentially shut down business activity in the country for at least five weeks as the government steps up measures to combat the coronavirus outbreak, sources said Saturday.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was to announce on Saturday evening a series of drastic steps meant to fight the outbreak of COVID-19, as the number of cases in Israel nears 200.

In a special press conference, was to be held by Netanyahu, Health Minister Yaakov Litzman and Health Ministry Director-General Moshe Bar-Siman-Tov, it is set to be announced that all places of employment deemed "non-essential" will be closed starting Monday and until after the Passover holiday.

The National Emergency Authority is in charge of determining the spheres of business which will be considered essential, including hospitals, medical laboratories, health clinics, pharmacies and supermarkets as well as security.

In addition, every director general of a government ministry will have to define who among their staff is "essential." Ynet has also learned that the Finance Ministry is in talks with many large companies in Israel in order to receive an estimate of their "essential" workforce.

Furthermore, the closure of the education sector, which so far included schools and universities, will be extended to kindergartens, special education and boarding schools. Israeli military has also tightened its guidelines for the soldiers, with the army calling on all troops away for the weekend to return on Sunday morning to their bases and be prepared for a month-long stay away from home.

It still remains unclear whether public transport operations will be halted.

03.16.20 – Su -

**U.S. moves nearer to full shutdown amid coronavirus fears**

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**U.S. moves nearer to full shutdown amid coronavirus fears**

Governors and mayors were closing restaurants, bars, and schools across the country as health officials recommend ban on gatherings over 50 people and even a complete 2-week shutdown to contain the spread of COVID-19

Associated Press| Published: 03.16.20 , 10:06

Officials across the country curtailed many elements of American life to fight the coronavirus outbreak on Sunday, with health officials recommending that groups of 50 or more don't get together and a government expert saying a 14-day national shutdown may be needed.

Governors and mayors were closing restaurants, bars, and schools as the nation sank deeper into chaos over the crisis. Travelers returning home from overseas trips were stuck in line for hours at major airports for screenings, causing them to be crammed into just the kind of crowded spaces that public health officials have been urging people to avoid.

In a sign of the impending economic gloom on the horizon, the Federal Reserve slashed its benchmark interest rate to near zero. President Donald Trump sought to calm a jittery nation by declaring that the government has "tremendous control" over the situation and urging people to stop the panic buying of grocery staples that has depleted the shelves of stores around the country. Gun stores started seeing a similar run on weapons and ammunition as the panic intensified.

As Americans struggled to come to terms with how to change their daily habits, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a dramatic recommendation: Because large events can fuel the spread of the disease, it said gatherings of 50 people or more should be canceled or postponed throughout the country for the next eight weeks. It added that, at any event, proper precautions should be taken, including making sure people are washing their hands and not getting too close.

But in a sign of the difficulty of striking the right balance, the statement from the CDC also said the recommendation does not apply to "the day to day operation of organizations such as schools, institutes of higher learning, or businesses."

Even before the warning, parts of the country already look like a ghost town, and others are about to follow as theme parks closed, Florida beaches shooed away spring breakers, Starbucks said it will accept only drive-thru and takeout orders, and Ohio and Illinois ordered bars and restaurants shuttered.

"The time for persuasion and public appeals is over," Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker said.

"This is not a joke. No one is immune to this."

California's governor asked the state's bars and restaurants to close, but didn't order it. New York City, meanwhile, said eateries could only accept takeout and delivery orders. Mayor Bill de Blasio also ordered nightclubs, movie theaters and other entertainment venues closed.

"These places are part of the heart and soul of our city. They are part of what it means to be a New Yorker," he said in a statement Sunday night. "But our city is facing an unprecedented threat, and we must respond with a wartime mentality."

His decision came after Dr. Anthony Fauci, the federal government's top infectious disease expert, said he would like to see a 14-day national shutdown imposed to prevent the virus's spread.

"I think Americans should be prepared that they are going to have to hunker down significantly more than we as a country are doing," said Fauci, a member of the White

House task force on combating the spread of coronavirus. He heads the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health.

There is no indication Trump is considering such a move.

The worldwide outbreak has sickened more than 162,000 people and left more than 6,000 dead, with thousands of new cases confirmed each day. The death toll in the United States climbed to 64, while infections passed 3,200.

Meanwhile, harsh criticism rained on Trump and his administration Sunday from state and local officials over long lines of returning international passengers at some U.S. airports that could have turned them into coronavirus carriers as they tried to get home. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot lambasted the administration for allowing about 3,000 Americans returning from Europe to be stuck for hours inside the customs area at O'Hare International Airport on Saturday, violating federal recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that people practice "social distancing."

The passengers, many of them rushing home because of fears they would be stuck in Europe, were screened for coronavirus symptoms before they were allowed to leave the airport.

Long lines also formed Saturday in Boston, Dallas and others of the 13 airports that are accepting return flights from Europe.

"People were forced into conditions that are against CDC guidance and are totally unacceptable," Lightfoot said.

Elizabeth Pulvermacher, a University of Wisconsin student, arrived Saturday at O'Hare from Madrid, where she had been studying and spent hours in line. The customs process made her feel "unsafe," she said.

"The whole idea is getting rid of the spread of coronavirus, but there were hundreds and hundreds of people in very close proximity," Pulvermacher said.

Dr. Robert Murphy, executive director of Institute for Global Health at Northwestern University, said he was "appalled" by what he saw Saturday at nearby O'Hare.

"If they weren't exposed to COVID-19 before, they probably are now. From a public health perspective, this is malpractice," Murphy said in a statement Sunday. "The lack of preparation and concern is unfathomable."

But the situation improved markedly Sunday at O'Hare and elsewhere. Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said wait times are down to 30 minutes after processes have been adjusted to better handle the influx and extra personnel sent to the airports that are "funneling" passengers returning from overseas.

Bailey Miles, a 20-year-old sophomore at Taylor University in Indiana, arrived also from Madrid fearing the worst, but she got through customs and a health screening in about an hour. She said officials seemed to have learned their lesson from Saturday, when some of her friends returned.

"The employees were really helpful, had positive attitudes and had a lot of grace," she said. She said a woman even passed out snacks.

At Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey, Amanda Kay said she was asked to keep her distance from other passengers when she arrived from Paris at Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey.

"They wanted 50 people at a time. So the first 50 people got off, and they asked us to keep a large distance between ourselves," she said. "We showed them the first form and

then as we walk there's a person who has the scan for your temperature. And then you go through Customs and then that was it."

Going forward, Wolf said he could not rule out a future halt to air travel within the U.S. Fauci said earlier Sunday on television that halting domestic travel had been discussed, though not seriously.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority of people recover.

And that may have given some people false hope, causing them to venture into crowds that Fauci and others would prefer they avoid. Even if someone doesn't become visibly ill, they can still carry the disease and spread it to others.

In New Orleans and Chicago, people clad in green for St. Patrick's Day packed bars and spilled onto crowded sidewalks on Saturday even after the cities canceled their parades.

New York City, which has the nation's largest public school district, announced that it will be closed starting Monday, joining most of the rest of the country. Mayor Bill de Blasio had originally balked, but under pressure from Gov. Andrew Cuomo and others he said Sunday, "I became convinced over the course of today that there is no other choice."

In Florida, Walt Disney World and Universal-Orlando were closing Sunday night for the rest of the month, joining their California siblings, which already closed. Farther south, Miami Beach and Fort Lauderdale officials announced that they are closing their beaches, where thousands of college spring breakers from around the world have flocked. The cities also ordered restaurants and bars closed by 10 pm and to keep crowds below 250. "We cannot become a petri dish for a very dangerous virus," Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber said. "Spring break is over. The party is over."

Starbucks said Sunday it is closing seating in its cafes and patio areas nationwide, but customers can still order at the counter, at drive-thrus or on the Starbucks app.

But not all government officials were as concerned. Oklahoma's Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt tweeted a picture of himself and his children at a crowded metro restaurant Saturday night.

Republican Rep. Devin Nunes had a similar message on FOX News Channel's Sunday Morning Futures, encouraging people to go to local restaurants and pubs despite the warnings of health officials.

03.13.20 – Fr -

Pentagon: U.S. strikes Iran-backed group that hit Iraq base

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Pentagon: U.S. strikes Iran-backed group that hit Iraq base

Officials say fighter jets hit five locations, mainly targeting Kataib Hezbollah weapons facilities; Esper: You don't get to shoot at our bases and kill and wound Americans and get away with it

Associated Press | Published: 03.13.20, 11:30

The U.S. launched airstrikes Thursday in Iraq, targeting the Iranian-backed Shiite militia members believed responsible for the rocket attack that killed and wounded American and British troops at a base north of Baghdad, the Pentagon said.

U.S. officials said multiple strikes by U.S. fighter jets hit five locations and mainly targeted Kataib Hezbollah weapons facilities inside Iraq.

A Defense Department statement said the strikes targeted five weapons storage facilities "to significantly degrade their ability to conduct future attacks."

The strikes marked a rapid escalation in tensions with Tehran and its proxy groups in Iraq, just two months after Iran carried out a massive ballistic missile attack against American troops at a base in Iraq.

They came just hours after top U.S. defense leaders threatened retaliation for the Wednesday rocket attack, making clear that they knew who did it and that the attackers would be held accountable.

"The United States will not tolerate attacks against our people, our interests, or our allies," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said.

"As we have demonstrated in recent months, we will take any action necessary to protect our forces in Iraq and the region."

The Pentagon statement said the facilities hit in the precision strikes were used to store weapons used to target the U.S. and coalition forces. It called the counterattack "defensive, proportional and in direct response to the threat" posed by the Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said Friday that the response to the "cowardly attack on coalition forces in Iraq has been swift, decisive and proportionate."

U.S. officials said the locations of the strikes were largely around the Baghdad region.

One U.S. official said there were two strikes at Jurf al-Sakher, one in Karbala, one at Al-Musayib, and one at Arab Nawar Ahmad.

The official said the U.S. expected casualties would be lower than 50, and said the main effort was to hit the weapons.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because some details about the operations had not yet been made public.

Iraqi religious authorities said Friday that one air strike hit a civilian airport under construction in Karbala and killed one worker.

An official with the paramilitary Popular Mobilization Units told The Associated Press that two Iraqi federal police personnel were killed in Jurf al-Sakher.

An Iraqi military statement said the aerial "aggression" occurred at 1:15 a.m. in the areas of Jurf al-Sakher, Al-Musayib, Najaf and Alexandria on the headquarters of the Popular Mobilization Units, emergency regiments and commandos of the 9th division of the Iraqi army.

Esper told reporters at the Pentagon earlier Thursday that President Donald Trump had given him the authority to take whatever action he deemed necessary.

"We're going to take this one step at a time, but we've got to hold the perpetrators accountable," Esper said.

"You don't get to shoot at our bases and kill and wound Americans and get away with it."

At the White House, Trump had also hinted that a U.S. counterpunch could be coming, telling reporters, "We'll see what the response is."

And Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Pentagon reporters the U.S. knows "with a high degree of certainty" who launched the attack.

On Capitol Hill earlier in the day, Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the top U.S.

commander for the Middle East, told senators the deaths of U.S. and coalition troops created a "red line" for the U.S., but said he didn't think Iran has "a good understanding of where our red line is."

Asked if any counterattack could include a strike inside Iran, Esper said: "We are focused on the group that we believe perpetrated this in Iraq."

Two U.S. troops and one British service member were killed and 14 other personnel were wounded when 18 rockets hit the base Wednesday.

The U.S. military said the 107 mm Katyusha rockets were fired from a truck launcher that was found by Iraqi security forces near the base after the attack.

U.S. officials have not publicly said what group they believe launched the rocket attack, but Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shiite militia group, was the likely perpetrator.

And the U.S. strikes, which came in the middle of the night in Iraq, targeted that group.

Kataib Hezbollah was responsible for a late December rocket attack on a military base in Kirkuk that killed a U.S. contractor, prompting American military strikes in response.

That in turn led to protests at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. They were followed Jan. 3

by a U.S. airstrike that killed Iran's most powerful military officer, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a leader of the Iran-backed militias in Iraq, of which Kataib Hezbollah is a member.

In response to the Soleimani killing, Iran launched a massive ballistic missile attack on Jan. 8, at al-Asad air base in Iraq, that resulted in traumatic brain injuries to more than 100 American troops.

McKenzie told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday morning that the killing of Soleimani and the increase in U.S. troops and assets in the region has made clear to Iran that the U.S. will defend its interests there. He said the U.S. has re-established a level of deterrence for state-on-state attacks by Iran.

However, he said: "What has not been changed is their continuing desire to operate through their proxies indirectly against us. That is a far more difficult area to deter."

On Thursday, Esper and Milley said they spoke with their British counterparts about the attack, but declined to provide details.

Asked why none of the rockets was intercepted, Milley said there are no systems on the base capable of defending against that type of attack.



He also said the 14 injured personnel were a mix of U.S. and allied troops as well as contractors, and they will also be monitored for possible traumatic brain injury in the wake of the blasts.

**Steve Buren Tue, Mar 17, 2020 at 2:45 PM  
To: Yehoshua Othniel**

**Take a special note on the virus control.  
In a world wide perspective, no one has any concern that Israel is isolated.**

**Israel has Zero Tourists, for first time in a century.**

**Israel has shut borders to all non-residents until after Passover.**

**All other countries have their residents returning to their homes.**

**All the blame is somewhere else.**

**I think this will be a very special Passover Holiday..**