

Ynet-News, May 01, 2020 – Wednesday

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Ministers vote to reopen schools, mayors hold till all the problems are solved

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Jordan halts Israeli farmers access to border harvesting this evening

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Travel restrictions extend or lifted by new cases found in neighborhoods

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Sunday hearing of petitioners on Netanyahu-Gantz deal; trial begins next month

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MKs extend cell phone tracking of patients to locate & quarantine vicinity contacts

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US may cut military support to Saudi Arabia to stabilize dramatic oil price decline

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Ministers vote to reopen schools, mayors hold till all the problems are solved

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Ministers vote to reopen schools as local mayors rebel

Tel Aviv mayor cites conflicting reports and last minute directives as reason for refusing to open schools in the city insisting he needs more time to ensure the safety of children and teaching staff

Ynet| Published: 05.01.20 , 14:32

As the ministerial committee on coronavirus decided Friday on the partial renewal of schools, municipalities and local councils have declared they will refuse to allow schools under their jurisdiction to open.

The ministers who met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided that schools will resume Sunday while operating under Health Ministry guidelines for first to third grades in primary schools and 11th and 12th grade for high schools.

Religious schools will open for 7th and 8th-grade students. Preschools and nurseries will remain closed until May 10 and 6th graders will return to schools no later than June 1.

The ministerial committee decided there would be no mandatory studies and parents will be able to decide whether or not they want to send their children back while the risk of infection from coronavirus is still high.

Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai said he commended the plan to reopen the educational establishments gradually, but added that since it is the job of local government to implement the ministers' decisions, and since regulations have not been established he would not be able to risk opening the city's schools at this time.

"It was not helpful to receive conflicting reports and to be told of a decision at the last moment, makes opening our schools next week a dangerous move," the mayor said.

The Tel Aviv primary schools' parents' associations commanded the municipality for their decision sighting conflicting instructions and unanswered questions.

The mayor of neighboring Ramat Gan also said he would not open schools in his city.

Mayor Carmel Shama said: "The government is disconnected from the people and the facts on the ground," adding no schools will be opened before all the problems are solved.

The Director-General of the Education Ministry Shmuel Abuav said he is pleased with the decision to open schools and that ministry workers have been busy preparing classrooms for a gradual reopening.

"We have a clear plan to meet all requirements," he said.

05.01.20 – Fr - - -

Jordan halts Israeli farmers access to border harvesting this evening

05.01.20 – Fr - - -

Jordan halts Israeli farmers' access to border enclave

Jordan on Thursday, joined other Arab countries in condemning Netanyahu's plan to annex large parts of the West Bank, including Israel settlements and the strategic Jordan Valley claiming annexation would extinguish hopes of an independent Palestinian state

Associated Press| Published: 05.01.20 , 12:47

Jordan's Foreign Ministry said Thursday that Israeli farmers will no longer be allowed to work their fields in an enclave of southern Jordan, ending a more than 25-year arrangement meant to shore up a historic peace agreement.

The announcement reflects the poor relations between the countries, which have been underscored by Jordan's vocal opposition to Israeli plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

Under their landmark 1994 peace deal, Jordan granted Israel a 25-year lease on two small areas along their border, Baqura, and Ghamr. Last year, Jordan said it would not renew the leases, but agreed to allow Israeli farmers to continue to harvest their crops in Ghamr, known to Israelis as Tsofar, for one more season.

It required the farmers, however, to obtain visas and enter the country through official border crossings, instead of the former system of allowing them to enter the areas freely. On Thursday, Jordan's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Ambassador Dhaifallah Al-Fayez, said the additional harvesting period "will end this evening."

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Israel's Foreign Ministry had no immediate comment.

The peace treaty, Israel's second with an Arab nation, began with great optimism, but relations have steadily deteriorated.

The accord remains a vital strategic asset for both countries, which maintain tight security cooperation and joint economic projects. But Israel's control of the West Bank and its policies in east Jerusalem, where Jordan has custodial rights over Muslim holy sites, have repeatedly raised tensions. A large part of Jordan's population is Palestinian, and public opinion has remained largely against normalized relations with Israel.

On Thursday, Jordan joined other Arab countries in condemning Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plan to annex large parts of the West Bank, including Israel settlements and the strategic Jordan Valley. The annexation plan, which would extinguish Palestinian hopes of establishing an independent state that includes all of the West Bank, has drawn widespread international opposition.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Al-Safadi said annexation "would kill a two-state solution, undermine the foundations of the peace process, and set off the conflict."

04.30.20 – Th - - -

Travel restrictions extend or lifted by new cases found in neighborhoods

04.30.20 – Th - - -

Cabinet approves renewed lockdown of Jerusalem neighborhoods

Bedouin village of Hura also set for harsh travel restrictions after 30 new cases found in last three days; Netivot lockdown lifted; restrictions over Beit Shemesh neighborhood extended by five days

Gilad Cohen, Amir Alon | Published: 04.30.20 , 18:26

The Cabinet on Thursday approved a renewed lockdown on several Jerusalem neighborhoods, including the southern Bedouin village of Hura, set to come into effect at 11pm.

Among the areas in the capital slated for further closures is the neighborhood of Romema and the ultra-Orthodox quarters of Kiryat Sanz and Kiryat Belz.

The ongoing lockdown on the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Ramat Beit was also extended by a further five days.

The government ordered the lockdown on the southern town of Netivot to be lifted immediately.

Officials also approved a five-day lockdown on neighborhoods 9 and 10 in the Bedouin town Hura after coronavirus cases spiked within the community in recent weeks.

The Health Ministry reported on Wednesday that since April 12, 4,904 cases of coronavirus have been confirmed, more than half of them in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak. The capital has seen the largest number of new cases with 1,462 confirmed in the past 18 days - a 74.6% increase in virus diagnoses while some ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in the city remain under partial closures and travel restrictions.

Hura, which had no confirmed infections until two weeks ago, now has 69 cases, 30 of them diagnosed in the last three days.

04.30.20 – Th - - -

Sunday hearing of petitioners on Netanyahu-Gantz deal; trial begins next month

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AG: No legal impediment to indicted Netanyahu serving as PM

Mandelblit warns that appointing prime minister charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust could be problematic, but says High Court should not deny will of majority of MKs; hundreds attend pro and anti-Netanyahu protests ahead of Sunday court hearing
Gilad Morag, AP | Updated: 04.30.20 , 15:07

There is no legal impediment to an indicted lawmaker serving as prime minister, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit wrote Thursday, but warned that appointment of premier under serious criminal indictment could be problematic.

The court will Sunday hear petitions against Benjamin Netanyahu serving as prime minister due to the charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust against him.

"Despite the significant difficulties that arise, they do not constitute grounds for judicial intervention that would deny the majority of the Knesset supporting the establishment of a new Israeli government presided over by MK Netanyahu," Mandelblit wrote in his opinion to the High Court ahead of the hearing.

Mandelblit also called on the court not to invalidate the coalition agreement, but severely criticized the terms of the deal.

Hundreds of protesters held pro and anti-Netanyahu protests outside the High Court in Jerusalem on Thursday, ahead of the hearing on Sunday.

Around 100 people, many waving Israeli flags and maintaining mandatory social distancing, staged a demonstration against what they called court intervention in the democratic process.

They held banners that read "The High Court is ruining democracy" and chanted, "the people are the sovereign."

On Sunday the court is scheduled to hear petitions from several nonprofit advocacy groups against the coalition government deal reached by Netanyahu and his main political opponent, former IDF chief Benny Gantz.

The two reached a power-sharing agreement earlier this month after more than a year of political stalemate and three deadlocked national elections.

Under the deal, Netanyahu and Gantz agreed to share the premiership, with Netanyahu serving as prime minister the first 18 months and Gantz serving the next 18 months. It also includes a clause to advance plans to annex parts of the West Bank, including Israeli settlements, starting July 1.

The groups are asking the court to ban any indicted politician, including Netanyahu, from being allowed to form a new government.

Benny Gantz and Benjamin Netanyahu sign an agreement to form a unity government
Netanyahu was charged earlier this year with bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. He has denied any wrongdoing and claims the indictments are part of a political witch hunt. His trial is scheduled to begin next month.

If the court rules in favor of the petitioners, the Netanyahu-Gantz deal could unravel, plunging the country into the fourth election in just over a year.

04.30.20 – Th - - -

MKs extend cell phone tracking of patients to locate & quarantine vicinity contacts

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MKs extend Shin Bet tracking of virus patients, pending legislation

Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee approves use of anti-terror measure to trace known coronavirus patients until Tuesday, warns that the government must begin to prepare law as required by High Court

Moran Azulay | Published: 04.30.20 , 11:45

The Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Thursday approved a five-day extension to the use of Shin Bet surveillance to track the movements of coronavirus patients in order to stem the spread of the disease.

The measure will continue to be used until midnight Tuesday, in line with a High Court ruling that the use of counter-terror measures against civilians must be covered by legislation.

The controversial Shin Bet process involves tracking the cell phone activity of confirmed coronavirus cases in order to locate anyone who had been in their immediate vicinity and instruct them to go into quarantine.

Critics say that it is an infringement of civil liberties and expressed concern that the method could be misused in the future and on Sunday the High Court said legislators must pass a law permitting the use of the measure.

"If the government decides that it will not advance the legislation then the extension will expire," said the committee's chairman, Blue & White MK Gabi Ashkenazi. "If it does decide to continue with the process, it can come to us on Tuesday and we will look into an extension."

Ashkenazi also called for an increase in the rate of epidemiological investigations and tests, in order to facilitate the economy's reopening.

"We understand there is a risk, but we will need have a daily routine alongside the coronavirus for the next year," he said.

"This is why it is important to boost the rate at which epidemiological investigations and tests are conducted, together with investigating other technological alternatives."

Prof. Sigal Sadetsky, the head of Public Health Services at the Health Ministry, warned about the implications of stopping the surveillance.

"It is clear that without surveillance we will miss many patients and many people who need to be in quarantine," she said. "It is clear that we need this in order to reopen the economy."

Sadetsky said that successful containment of the highly infectious disease hinged on the ability to trace patients and anyone with whom they had been in close contact.

"We fluctuate between 170-184 new infections daily, but we need to see the bigger picture," she said.

"As we reopen the economy, the number of cases will rise and then we truly will need track each new patient and those who they came into contact with."

Sunday's High Court ruling, penned by Chief Justice Esther Hayut, said: "We must keep watch so that the unusual events with which we are now dealing do not lead us down a slippery slope where such unusual invasive measures are used without justification."

The ruling added: "If the country wishes to employ the measures provided by the Shin Bet, it must first act to legislate such a move.

"As the legislative proceeding is initiated, the [Shin Bet] certification period can be extended by no more than a few weeks. In order to allow the completion of this procedure."

05.01.20 – Fr - - -

US may cut military support to Saudi Arabia to stabilize dramatic oil price decline

05.01.20 – Fr - - -

Report: Trump threatened to cut US military support to Saudi Arabia to secure oil output slash

A dramatic price decline that followed threatened to bring down the US shale oil industry, which operates at a higher profit margin than the Saudi industry; two weeks after the threat OPEC announced it will reduce production

Reuters| Published: 05.01.20 , 18:19

US President Donald Trump leveraged US military assistance to Saudi Arabia to force Riyadh to set up the international deal providing for a large-scale crude output cut, Reuters reported Thursday.

According to the agency, a phone call between Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on April 2 saw the former state that if the Saudi-led oil producers' alliance does not close the taps, he will not be able to push hold the lawmakers back from legislating restrictions on US-Saudi military cooperation.

Those, he warned, might go as far as to prompt a US withdrawal from the country in what could be an end for a decades-long alliance between Washington and Riyadh. As per one of the four sources cited by the agency, the prince found the threat so shocking that he told his assistants to leave the room to continue the conversation with more privacy.

Less than two weeks after the phone conversation, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries announced it had reached a deal with Russia that set the stage for a dramatic reduction in output.

The deal came at a time when the global market was oversaturated as the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed to contain it cut into the demand.

The dramatic price decline that followed threatened to bring down the US shale oil industry, which operates at a higher profit margin than the Saudi industry.

04.30.20 – Th - - -

UN warns 9 years of war & crowded conditions in Syria beckon a virus tragedy

04.30.20 – Th - - -

UN warns that 'tragedy beckons' in Syria from virus

With millions of people displaced in crowded conditions and without adequate sanitation in Syria, international agency warns it is only a matter of time until there is widespread coronavirus-related disaster there

Associated Press| Published: 04.30.20 , 12:40

The United Nations humanitarian chief said Wednesday that more than 40 cases of COVID-19 and at least three deaths have been reported in Syria, signaling that "tragedy beckons" after nine years of war that has left the country's health care system decimated.

Mark Lowcock told the UN Security Council that while the number may sound low compared to other countries, testing in Syria is very limited. The UN special envoy for Syria, meanwhile, called for a lasting cease-fire to fighting in the country.

With millions of people displaced in crowded conditions and without adequate sanitation, he said Syria can't be expected "to cope with a crisis that is challenging even the wealthiest nations."

Efforts are being made to set up isolation areas in displacement camps and health facilities in Syria, but measures aimed at containing the virus are already having side effects such as skyrocketing food prices in some areas, he said.

Lowcock said essential **medical supplies and equipment must be allowed into the country**, and that the Al Yarubiyah **border crossing from Iraq to Syria's northeast must be reopened.**

The border **crossing** was **closed in January** at **Russia's insistence**, and Lowcock said deliveries of medical supplies to the northeast from Damascus have not filled the gap. Syrian Kurds established an autonomous zone in the northeast in 2012 and were U.S. partners on the ground in fighting the Islamic State extremist group. A Turkish offensive in October against Syrian Kurdish militants led the U.S. to abandon its Kurdish allies, leading to strong criticism of both Washington and Ankara.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a cease-fire to all conflicts around the world on March 23 to tackle the coronavirus pandemic, and at separate Security Council meetings Wednesday on Syria's political and humanitarian situation there was widespread support for his appeal.

Geir Pedersen, the UN special envoy for Syria, welcomed the fact that there has been "significant calm in many areas of Syria," with no all-out offensives since early March. He said Russian-Turkish arrangements have taken hold in the northwest, the last opposition stronghold, and cease-fire arrangements between Russia, Turkey and the United States in the northeast "also continue to broadly hold."

He said the **calm was "uneasy and fragile"** and there is a constant risk of things escalating. He appealed for a cease-fire "that results in sustained calm and is nationwide in scope, one that does not see new assaults across lines of contact, and enables Syrians to access equipment and resources necessary to combat COVID-19."

But Russia and the U.S. disagreed about who should be in the lead in pursuing a cease-fire and an end to the Syrian conflict.

Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told the council that the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey - the guarantor states in the so-called "Astana process" aimed at ending the Syria conflict - held a video conference on April 22 and "underscored the leading role of Astana **in promoting a Syrian settlement.**"

He said this includes **stabilizing the situation in the country, dealing with refugees**, resolving **humanitarian problems** and promoting a **dialogue among Syrians** in the committee that is to draft a new constitution.

Nebenzia said the ministers of Russia and Iran, who support Syrian President Bashar Assad, and Turkey, which backs the opposition, would prepare for the next Astana summit.

The acting U.S. deputy ambassador, Cherith Norman Chalet, said the UN "must be at the center of any effort to establish a comprehensive, enduring, and verifiable nationwide cease-fire."

France's UN Ambassador Nicolas de Riviere also stressed that the U.N. must be "at the forefront" of cease-fire efforts.

He called for a broader political process than just the constitutional committee and told the council that "France is deeply concerned about the growing instability everywhere in Syria."

Russia's Nebenzia ticked off "terrorist" groups operating in Syria's northwest and stressed that the "pandemic cannot be used as a pretext to whitewash terrorists."

"Appeals to Damascus to step up its efforts to fight the pandemic are irrelevant as to 30% of territories which are under effective control either of foreign troops or of opposition or of terrorists," Nebenzia said.

"Those controlling these territories should be responsible for it."