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Settlement of no cases, has 44 after wedding, leaders hope testing can reduce spread

12.04.20

Settlement becomes virus hotspot after string of health violations

Epidemiological investigation links at least 18 of Kedumim's 44 coronavirus cases to a wedding; local leaders hope increased testing, alongside contact tracing and quarantine, could significantly reduce morbidity next week

Elisha Ben Kimon| Published: 12.04.20 , 19:09

The settlement of Kedumim in the northern West Bank has turned into a COVID-19 hotspot after a slew of violations of health regulations spanning across two weeks.

According to health officials' estimates, the outbreak began after a local family participated in a wedding that took place outside the settlement last month. Some guests at the event were later found to be carrying the pathogen. The family returned to the settlement without knowing that some of them have also contracted the virus.

An epidemiological investigation was able to link at least 18 of Kedumim's 44 coronavirus cases to the event. Some 500 residents were in isolation after coming in contact with confirmed COVID-19 patients. In the following days after the wedding, family visits of relatives residing outside the settlement, shared Shabbat suppers and other social gatherings in which participants flouted health guidelines helped coronavirus spread further within the community, with dozens of its members becoming infected.

At the peak of the outbreak, almost 800 residents were ordered to self-isolate and schools were almost completely shuttered. Police were called to conduct house inspections and patrols in the settlement.

Kedumim Regional Council leader Hananel Dorani said that it took authorities a week to grasp the full extent of the outbreak since none of the settlement's residents have contracted the virus before.

Having conducted over 2,000 coronavirus tests in the previous week, local leaders hope that increased testing, alongside contact tracing and quarantine, could significantly reduce the number of active coronavirus patients in the settlement by next week.

12.03.20

Hezbollah & Jihads show high motivation to initiate holiday attacks on Israelis

12.03.20

Israel urges citizens to avoid Gulf, cites Iran threat

NSC also warns against travel to Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kurdish area of Iraq and Africa following Tehran's calls to attack Israeli targets in retaliation for the killing of its top nuclear scientist

Associated Press | Published: 12.03.20, 22:15

Israel on Thursday urged its citizens to avoid travel to the Gulf states of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, citing threats of Iranian attacks.

The travel advisory by the National Security Council (NSC) comes as Iran is threatening to attack Israeli targets following the assassination of its top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, last Friday, in an attack the Islamic Republic attributes to Israel. Israel has not commented.

Israel signed agreements establishing diplomatic relations with the UAE and Bahrain in September in the form of the Abraham Accords. The agreements have generated widespread excitement in Israel and thousands of Israeli tourists are scheduled to travel to the Gulf this month.

"In light of the threats heard recently by Iranian officials and in light of the involvement in the past of Iranian officials in terror attacks in various countries, there is a concern that Iran will try to act in this way against Israeli targets," said a statement issued by the NSC. The travel advisory further warns against travel to Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, the Kurdish area of Iraq and Africa.

Iran and its proxies have targeted Israeli tourists and Jewish communities in the past. Hezbollah agents bombed a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, in 2012, killing six and wounding dozens.

That year, Israel also accused Iran of being behind attacks targeting Israeli diplomats in Thailand and India. Iran and Hezbollah also bombed the Israeli Embassy and Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994, claiming the lives of scores of civilians.

Concerns for the safety of Israelis in Dubai also is not without precedent. In 2000, an Israeli ex-colonel was kidnapped by Iranian proxy Hezbollah and held captive in Lebanon until he was released in a prisoner exchange in 2004.

The security body also warned that Jihadist organizations, including the Islamic State, "are showing a high motivation to commit terrorist attacks," given recent terrorist attacks in France and Germany.

"Calls by global Jihad factors to attack Israelis and Jews have been heard," the statement said. "It is possible that part of the current wave of global terror will reach targets identified with Israel or Jewish communities, synagogues, kosher restaurants and Jewish museums."

The NSC also warned that terrorist organizations could take advantage of the upcoming Christmas and New Years' holiday to initiate attacks.

12.03.20

Bahrain flights from Israel begin Jan 7 with no import product origin label issue

12.03.20

Bahrain gives free pass to settlements as Palestinians fume

Manama says it will not distinguish between Israel imports from within country and those made in West Bank, Golan; PLO slams decision as 'contradicting international and UN resolutions'

Reuters| Published: 12.03.20 , 16:01

Bahrain's imports from Israel will not be subject to distinctions between products made within Israel and those from settlements in occupied territory, the Bahraini trade minister said on Thursday, drawing a rebuke from the Palestinians.

Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates formalized ties with Israel on Sept. 15, in a U.S.-sponsored deal billed by the Gulf countries as being made possible by Israel's shelving of a plan to annex West Bank settlements. Most world powers deem them illegal.

But Bahrain's Industry, Commerce and Tourism Minister Zayed bin Rashid al-Zayani voiced openness to settlement imports.

"We will treat Israeli products as Israeli products. So we have no issue with labelling or origin," he said during a visit to Israel.

Under European Union guidelines, settlement products should be clearly labelled as such when exported to EU member countries. The Trump administration last month removed U.S. customs distinctions between goods made within Israel and in settlements.

Israel's national security adviser, Meir Ben-Shabbat, left, bumps elbows with Bahrain's

Al-Zayani's remarks were condemned by Wasel Abu Youssef of the Palestine Liberation Organization as "contradicting international and UN resolutions".

He urged Arab countries not to import products from within Israel, either, in order to prevent it "stretching into Arab markets to strengthen its economy."

The Palestinians hope to create their own independent state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, but the issue of settlements on land captured by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War has long been a stumbling block in the now-stalemate peace process.

They now fear that the warming ties between Gulf states and Israel, along with Trump's strong support for Israel, have badly damaged their aspirations.

It was not clear what other Gulf states' positions on imports from the settlements were.

But an Israeli winery that uses grapes grown on the Golan Heights said in September that its labels would be sold in the UAE.

Israel expects trade with Bahrain worth around \$220 million in 2021, not including possible defense and tourism deals.

Al-Zayani said Bahraini carrier Gulf Air was tentatively scheduled to begin flights to Tel Aviv on Jan. 7, with shipping to follow.

"We are fascinated by how integrated IT and innovation sector in Israel has been embedded in every facet of life," he said.

He played down speculation in Israel that its citizens visiting Bahrain could be at risk of reprisals for the assassination last Friday of a top Iranian nuclear scientist, which Tehran blamed on Israel.

"We don't see any threats, and therefore we don't see any requirement for additional security or special treatment for Israelis," he said.

12.03.20

Gantz forced February elections, joining opposition allies with same sex adoption

12.03.20

Defiant Gantz defends election bill, calls for February vote

'Netanyahu did not utter one word of truth,' defense minister says of PM's post-vote speech, rejecting claim that Blue & White violated coalition agreement; calls for truncated election campaign to reduce costs during ruinous pandemic

Moran Azulay | Published: 12.03.20 , 15:15

A defiant Benny Gantz said Thursday that he does not regret voting to end the government of which he is a part, calling for the apparently inevitable fourth round of elections in two years to take place by the end of February.

"I preferred to pay the price myself rather than inflict it on Israelis," the Blue & White leader told Ynet, a day after the bill passed its preliminary vote in the Knesset.

Gantz said he has instructed the chairman of the Knesset House Committee - Blue & White MK Eitan Ginzburg - to attempt to set a date for the next election as early as possible, "so that we don't have a drawn out and expensive campaign during a health crisis."

Coronavirus restrictions may require more than one day of voting that would increase costs the defense minister said, adding that funding "should come out of the budget given to the political parties for elections."

Gantz also lashed out at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his speech hours after the preliminary vote on the bill, dismissing his allegations about Blue & White violating their joint coalition agreement and his claims of defense, diplomacy and healthcare successes.

"Netanyahu did not utter one word of truth during his entire speech yesterday," Gantz said. "Blue & White never violated the coalition agreement," he added, challenging the prime minister to present an example if he had one.

"The fact that there is no budget is a financial crime committed only because Netanyahu refuses to leave the Prime Minister's residence and fulfill his commitment to a rotation," Gantz said.

"No one can say I did try in earnest, to work with the prime minister," he said adding that the budget has been ready in the Finance Ministry, claiming the prime minister continues to block its approval for irrelevant reasons.

The defense minister has instructed his party's leadership to explore the possibility of forming an alternative government with alliances with opposition factions, before the final reading of the bill triggers the dissolution of parliament and fresh elections.

The party has also proposed some legislation in line with their platform, including a bill to extend the right to surrogacy to same sex couples.

12.03.20

Special UN Assembly over 100 world leaders treats vaccines as a global solution

12.03.20

Macron, Merkel and Johnson to speak to special U.N. session on COVID-19

With news of multiple vaccines for COVID-19 on the cusp of approval, the UN security council will hold a special session to address the coronavirus pandemic crisis; with U.N. Secretary General urging for 'wartime' plan as international response

Associated Press| Updated: 12.03.20 , 09:05

Nearly 100 world leaders and several dozen government ministers are scheduled to speak at the U.N. General Assembly's special session that opens Thursday to discuss the response to COVID-19 and the best path to recovery from the pandemic, which has claimed 1.5 million lives and shattered economies in both rich and poor countries.

Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said when he took the reins of the 193-member world body in September that it would have been better to hold the high-level meeting in June. Nonetheless, he said Wednesday that the session "provides a historic moment for us to come together to beat COVID-19."

"With news of multiple vaccines on the cusp of approval, and with trillions of dollars flowing into global recovery efforts, the international community has a unique opportunity to do this right," he said. "The world is looking to the U.N. for leadership. This is a test for multilateralism."

When financial markets collapsed and the world faced its last great crisis in 2008, major powers worked together to restore the global economy, but the COVID-19 pandemic has been striking for the opposite response: no leader, no united action to stop the pandemic that has circled the globe.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a letter to leaders of the Group of 20, the world's richest nations responsible for 80 percent of the global economy ahead of their summit in late March as COVID-19 was starting its killing spree urging that they adopt a "wartime" plan and cooperate on an international response to suppress the coronavirus. But there was no response.

The two-day special session will not be raising money to finance vaccine immunizations or taking any political action, and there will be no final declaration, just a summary document from Bozkir.

"The real point of this special session is to galvanize concrete action to approach our response to COVID-19 in a multilateral and collective way," General Assembly spokesman Brenden Varma said Wednesday. He added there are currently many responses to the pandemic, but what's needed now is to bring together all countries, U.N. actors, the private sector and vaccine developers.

Leaders and ministers from over 140 countries will deliver pre-recorded speeches on Thursday after an in-person opening in the General Assembly including speeches by Bozki and Guterres.

Among the leaders slated to address the session are French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, and European Union chief Charles Michel. The United States will be represented by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar.

Friday's session will focus on three virtual panels, the first on the U.N.'s response to COVID-19 and the second on vaccines that will include representatives from producers BioNTech and Oxford University-AstraZeneca, and the World Health Organization's ACT-Accelerator which is working to get vaccines to the world's poorest people. The final panel is on recovery from COVID-19. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus is expected to participate in all three panels.

Canada's U.N. deputy ambassador Louise Blais, who organized the special session with Azerbaijan's Ambassador Yashar Aliev, said it will be the first time that the U.N. system is bringing key players together to focus on COVID-19's "myriad impacts."

"Countries around the world are facing their own internal impacts, but it's important that the U.N. continue to advocate ... that this crisis impacts us all and the solutions are global," she told The Associated Press in an interview. "So, we have to work together in order to ensure that all of us get out of this, because until everyone does, no one is really safe."

Blais said the session is "an important step" and will focus on implementing the three resolutions adopted by the General Assembly on COVID-19, especially the wide-ranging measure approved in September.

The special session "comes at a critical time," Blais noted, "because we now know that there are a number of vaccines that have proven to be effective."

"Now, all eyes are on the critical distribution of vaccines," she said, adding that this is expected to be a key during the special session and it's one "where the world is expecting us to work together and make sure that we have an equitable distribution of vaccine globally."

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said secretary-general Guterres will be focusing on the need for all countries and people everywhere to have access to vaccines.

"The vaccine needs to be treated as a `global public good'" and that will be the basis of the secretary-general's message" Thursday, Dujarric said.

12.02.20

Israel Navy adds Saar-6 corvette to fleet as bulwark for Mediterranean gas fields

12.02.20

Israel receives its most advanced warship as Iran tensions rise

The Saar-6 corvette missile boat will be used as a precaution against Soviet-designed Yakhont cruise missiles and Iranian-made Khalij Fars rockets, while also protecting off-shore gas fields close to Lebanon

Reuters| Published: 12.02.20 , 19:13

Israel received its most advanced warship on Wednesday, describing the German-made vessel dubbed "Shield" as a bulwark for vulnerable Mediterranean gas rigs as tensions with Tehran soar over the assassination of a top Iranian nuclear scientist.

The Saar-6 corvette that docked in Haifa port, and three of the same model to follow next year, will bring to 15 the number of missile boats deployed by an Israeli navy which, while small, carries out missions as far away as the Red Sea and the Gulf.

Israel also wants to protect off-shore natural gas fields close to Lebanon, an old foe with which it has held so far fruitless U.S.-mediated maritime border talks.

"The welcome discovery of the gas fields off Israel's shore made it necessary to create a plan that will provide a protective envelope," President Reuven Rivlin said at ceremony at the port.

The navy sees a threat to the gas rigs from Lebanon's Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas, especially after Tehran vowed to retaliate for Friday's killing of nuclear mastermind Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, which it blamed on Israel.

"The Iranians are looking for 'prestige' targets like these, that can be hit with low casualties, meaning - they may hope - less chance of escalation," an Israeli security official told Reuters. "The question is whether Hezbollah would strike now." Though Hezbollah has previously threatened the gas rigs, it said responding to Fakhrizadeh's death was in Iran's hands. Beirut has urged "all parties" to show restraint.

Israel has neither confirmed nor denied responsibility for the assassination, which came as the region weighs Iran's changing fortunes with next month's U.S. presidential handover from Donald Trump to the more diplomacy-minded Joe Biden.

The Fakhrizadeh hit may have been "timed to narrow the risk of a significant Iranian offensive response in the near term, given the fears in Tehran of a severe offensive overreaction on the part of the Trump administration, and an Iranian desire to facilitate the resumption of contact with the Biden administration," wrote Amos Yadlin and Assaf Orion of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies.

the coffin of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh carried inside the Shrine of electronic countermeasures for cruise missiles, which have a flat trajectory, and a maritime version of the Iron Dome system for shooting down high-angle rockets.

These, a senior naval officer said, are precautions against Soviet-designed Yakhont cruise missiles and Iranian-made Khalij Fars rockets that Israel believes are in Hezbollah's arsenal.

12.02.20

Knesset expects PM to remain for three-month election to form a new coalition

12.02.20

Knesset panel to meet Monday on bill that would trigger fourth elections in 2 years
House Committee to deliberate on and revise draft legislation that would dissolve parliament before it has three full votes in plenum; Joint List MK Mansour Abbas facing disciplinary measures for skipping vote

Ynet| Published: 12.02.20 , 19:01

Knesset House Committee will convene Monday to discuss a bill to dissolve the Knesset, whose passage in a preliminary vote Wednesday set Israel on track to hold its fourth elections in less than two years.

The vote, sponsored by opposition leader Yair Lapid and backed by coalition party Blue & White, passed by 61 votes to 51 as a row over the formulation of the state budget threatened to bring down the government.

Once the bill is deliberated and revised by the House committee, it is sent back to the Knesset plenum for its first full vote. If it passes that vote - it then goes back to the House Committee for further revision ahead of its second and final vote.

The process is expected to take between several days and several weeks.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz, whose Blue & White part has been at odds with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud since the two leaders agreed to sit in a coalition government together in April.

The unity government has sparred over the structure of the state budget with Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition partners willing to vote only on a very short term version of the 2020 budget, contrary to the coalition agreement that calls for a two-year budget that includes 2021.

If the long-term budget is passed, Netanyahu would no longer have the 2021 budget as a trump card and would be forced to commit to the rotation agreement that would mean Gantz taking over as prime minister next year.

But if the government collapses because a budget has not been passed, Netanyahu would remain as prime minister throughout the three-month election campaign and until a new coalition is formed.

Speaking shortly before entering the Knesset plenum for the vote, Gantz made sure to leave a lifeline for Netanyahu to avoid elections, saying "If Netanyahu approves the budget, everything will work out."

"Anything that prevents elections is a welcome thing. The best solution is for this budget to be passed and for this government to continue to function."

Members of MK Mansour Abbas' Ra'am party, recently allied with the prime minister on various shared interests, skipped the vote. Ra'am is part of the Joint List political alliance, which is currently in opposition. The remainder of the Joint List faction voted in favor of

dissolving parliament and Abbas was facing internal disciplinary measures for Ra'am's absence from the vote.

12.02.20

MK vote needs 3 more passes before election & PM can form a new coalition

12.02.20

MKs approve preliminary vote to dissolve Knesset

Bill needs to pass 3 more readings before fourth elections in two years is called; Gantz gives PM chance to avoid national ballot by passing budget; Mansour Abbas' Ra'am party, recently allied with PM, skips vote, while rest of Joint List votes in favor
Moran Azulay, Attila Somfalvi | Updated: 12.02.20, 15:19

The Knesset on Wednesday afternoon approved the preliminary vote on a bill to dissolve itself, threatening to plunge Israel into its fourth election in less than two years.

The bill, which passed by 61 votes to 54, requires three additional successful readings in the Knesset before it passes and new elections must be called, giving coalition leaders a chance to resolve their differences that for now are centered around the state budget.

After the vote, the bill was sent to the Knesset House Committee for deliberation. It will then be presented again in the Knesset for the first full vote, after which it will go back to the House Committee in the coming weeks before its second and third plenum votes.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz on Tuesday made a bombshell announcement that his Blue & White party would vote in favor of the bill. He accused his coalition partner Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of consistently misleading the public over a budget row to serve his own political ends.

The unity government has sparred over the structure of the state budget with Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition partners willing to vote only on a very short term version of the 2020 budget, contrary to the coalition agreement that calls for a two-year budget that includes 2021.

If the long-term budget is passed, Netanyahu would no longer have the 2021 budget as a trump card and would be forced to commit to the rotation agreement that would mean Gantz taking over as prime minister next year.

But if the government collapses because a budget has not been passed, Netanyahu would remain as prime minister throughout the three-month election campaign and until a new coalition is formed.

While a motion to dissolve the Knesset proposed by the opposition would normally be voted down automatically by members of the coalition, Blue & White's continued support means it is all but assured to win final approval.

Members of MK Mansour Abbas' Ra'am party, recently allied with the prime minister on various shared interests, skipped the vote. Ra'am is part of the Joint List political alliance, which is currently in opposition. The remainder of the Joint List faction voted in favor of dissolving parliament.

Speaking shortly before entering the Knesset plenum for the vote, Gantz made sure to leave a lifeline for Netanyahu to avoid elections - by approving a two-year state budget as was agreed upon in the coalition deal signed in May.

"If Netanyahu approves the budget, everything will work out," Gantz said. "Anything that prevents elections is a welcome thing. The best solution is for this budget to be passed and for this government to continue to function."

Gantz's former ally turned critic, Opposition Leader Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid, presented the bill in the plenum.

"There is an adult [in charge] but he is not responsible," Lapid said at the onset of the debate. "Whenever there is a problem he throws the responsibility onto someone else. You have left too many of us behind, desperate and alone."

He added the legislation "is not here today as another round of 'just not Bibi'. It is here because it is time to stop the anger, hatred and mismanagement and as long as he is there, it will not stop."

It is unlikely, however, that Netanyahu will be willing to compromise, and his allies have already announced the election campaign has begun as they consider possible dates to hold the national vote.

Those close to the prime minister said the accusations made by Gantz left no recourse but to end the dysfunctional coalition government formed in May after the March 2020 election.

Netanyahu would also benefit by further delaying the budget talks. That would give more time for the coronavirus vaccine to arrive and the economy to begin recovering next year, presumably giving him a better chance in elections.

Opinion polls predict that Netanyahu's Likud Party would still emerge as the largest party in parliament in the next election, but with far fewer seats than it currently has. Gantz's Blue & White has plummeted even further, making it in both their interests to compromise and avoid a new election.

12.03.20

US reduces staff in Iraq & may close embassy after rockets & roadside bombs

12.03.20

U.S. withdraws diplomats from Iraq citing security concerns

Moves comes in run-up to first anniversary of killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani; senior source describes step as minor drawdown, with ambassador and key staff to remain in Baghdad

AFP| Updated: 12.03.20, 10:49

The American embassy in Baghdad has partially withdrawn its staff due to security concerns, two senior Iraqi officials told AFP late Wednesday.

Dozens of rocket attacks and roadside bombs have targeted the U.S. mission and other American military installations across Iraq over the last year.

The partial withdrawal - which comes in the run-up to the first anniversary of the killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani - appears to be the result of fresh security concerns, one Iraqi official said.

"It's a minor drawdown based on security reservations from the U.S. side. They could come back -- it's just a security blip," the senior source said, speaking on condition of anonymity in order to talk to the press.

"We knew ahead of time and top diplomatic staff including the ambassador are staying, so this is not a rupture of diplomatic ties."

A second top official confirmed it was an effort to "minimize risk."

Neither could say how many of the several hundred diplomats based at the embassy had been pulled out.

A U.S. State Department spokesperson declined to comment on the withdrawal, but said the safety of American officials, citizens and facilities in Iraq "remains our highest priority."

The spokesperson said U.S. Ambassador Matthew Tueller was still in Iraq and that the embassy "continues to operate."

Washington has blamed the rocket and roadside bomb attacks on pro-Iran hardline groups in Iraq and has retaliated twice by bombing one of those factions, Kataeb Hezbollah.

When the attacks continued, the US issued an ultimatum to Iraq, threatening to fully close down its embassy.

An Iranian missile attack on U.S. forces in Iraq following the Assassination of Revolutionary Guard Corps chief Qasem Soleimani in January

That prompted Iran-aligned factions to agree to a "truce" in mid-October, and the attacks swiftly stopped.

On November 17, a volley of rockets hit several Baghdad neighborhoods, killing one girl. Top Iraqi and Western officials said at the time that they expected the truce to hold, but said Washington was still drawing up withdrawal plans.

One Western official said in late November that the U.S. was studying three options, including a partial withdrawal.

"They're exploring drawing down the embassy to just the ambassador and key diplomatic staff," the official said.

Iraqi and Western officials see a turbulent few weeks ahead of the White House handover from departing President Donald Trump, who has pursued a "maximum pressure" policy against Iran that has also squeezed its allies next door in Iraq.

They did not rule out last-minute military action by the Trump administration on Iranian interests in Iraq.

"There's a feeling that there are a few weeks left to go [before Trump leaves office] and who knows what could happen," the Western official said.

12.02.20

AG Barr - FBI will not investigate election fraud must audit by state or locals

12.02.20

Disputing Trump, Barr says no widespread election fraud

Trump attorneys slam AG for failing to properly investigate fraud claims; Barr says appointed special investigator into Russian collusion accusations against Trump post 2016 elections

Associated Press| Updated: 12.02.20 , 06:59

Disputing President Donald Trump's persistent, baseless claims, Attorney General William Barr declared Tuesday the U.S. Justice Department has uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the 2020 election.

Barr's comments, in an interview with the The Associated Press, contradict the concerted effort by Trump, his boss, to subvert the results of last month's voting and block President-elect Joe Biden from taking his place in the White House.

Barr told the AP that U.S. attorneys and FBI agents have been working to follow up specific complaints and information they've received, but "to date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election."

The comments, which drew immediate criticism from Trump attorneys, were especially notable coming from Barr, who has been one of the president's most ardent allies. Before the election, he had repeatedly raised the notion that mail-in voting could be especially vulnerable to fraud during the coronavirus pandemic as Americans feared going to polls and instead chose to vote by mail.

More to Trump's liking, Barr revealed in the AP interview that in October he had appointed U.S. Attorney John Durham as a special counsel, giving the prosecutor the authority to continue to investigate the origins of the Trump-Russia probe after Biden takes over and making it difficult to fire him. Biden hasn't said what he might do with the investigation, and his transition team didn't comment Tuesday.

Trump has long railed against the investigation into whether his 2016 campaign was coordinating with Russia, but he and Republican allies had hoped the results would be delivered before the 2020 election and would help sway voters. So far, there has been only one criminal case, a guilty plea from a former FBI lawyer to a single false statement charge.

Under federal regulations, a special counsel can be fired only by the attorney general and for specific reasons such as misconduct, dereliction of duty or conflict of interest. An attorney general must document such reasons in writing.

Barr went to the White House Tuesday for a previously scheduled meeting that lasted about three hours.

Trump didn't directly comment on the attorney general's remarks on the election. But his personal attorney Rudy Giuliani and his political campaign issued a scathing statement

claiming that, “with all due respect to the Attorney General, there hasn’t been any semblance” of an investigation into the president’s complaints.

Other administration officials who have come out forcefully against Trump’s allegations of voter-fraud evidence have been fired. But it’s not clear whether Barr might suffer the same fate. He maintains a lofty position with Trump, and despite their differences the two see eye-to-eye on quite a lot.

Still, Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer quipped: “I guess he’s the next one to be fired.”

Last month, Barr issued a directive to U.S. attorneys across the country allowing them to pursue any “substantial allegations” of voting irregularities before the 2020 presidential election was certified, despite no evidence at that time of widespread fraud.

That memorandum gave prosecutors the ability to go around longstanding Justice Department policy that normally would prohibit such overt actions before the election was certified. Soon after it was issued, the department’s top elections crime official announced he would step aside from that position because of the memo.

The Trump campaign team led by Giuliani has been alleging a widespread conspiracy by Democrats to dump millions of illegal votes into the system with no evidence. They have filed multiple lawsuits in battleground states alleging that partisan poll watchers didn’t have a clear enough view at polling sites in some locations and therefore something illegal must have happened. The claims have been repeatedly dismissed including by Republican judges who have ruled the suits lacked evidence.

But local Republicans in some battleground states have followed Trump in making unsupported claims, prompting grave concerns over potential damage to American democracy.

Trump himself continues to rail against the election in tweets and in interviews though his own administration has said the 2020 election was the most secure ever. He recently allowed his administration to begin the transition over to Biden, but he still refuses to admit he lost.

The issues they’ve have pointed to are typical in every election: Problems with signatures, secrecy envelopes and postal marks on mail-in ballots, as well as the potential for a small number of ballots miscast or lost.

But they’ve gone further. Attorney Sidney Powell has spun fictional tales of election systems flipping votes, German servers storing U.S. voting information and election software created in Venezuela “at the direction of Hugo Chavez,” – the late Venezuelan president who died in 2013. Powell has since been removed from the legal team after an interview she gave where she threatened to “blow up” Georgia with a “biblical” court filing.

Barr didn’t name Powell specifically but said: “There’s been one assertion that would be systemic fraud and that would be the claim that machines were programmed essentially to skew the election results. And the DHS and DOJ have looked into that, and so far, we haven’t seen anything to substantiate that.”

In the campaign statement, Giuliani claimed there was “ample evidence of illegal voting in at least six states, which they have not examined.”

“We have many witnesses swearing under oath they saw crimes being committed in connection with voter fraud. As far as we know, not a single one has been interviewed by the DOJ. The Justice Department also hasn’t audited any voting machines or used their subpoena powers to determine the truth,” he said.

However, Barr said earlier that people were confusing the use of the federal criminal justice system with allegations that should be made in civil lawsuits. He said a remedy for many complaints would be a top-down audit by state or local officials, not the U.S. Justice Department.

“There’s a growing tendency to use the criminal justice system as sort of a default fix-all,” he said, but first there must be a basis to believe there is a crime to investigate.

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“Most claims of fraud are very particularized to a particular set of circumstances or actors or conduct. ... And those have been run down; they are being run down,” Barr said.

“Some have been broad and potentially cover a few thousand votes. They have been followed up on.”