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01.25.21

Orthodox youth rioters set fire to a bus and stoned mayor's car clashing with police Sunday night

01.25.21

'If I'd have stayed, I would have died,' says driver of bus torched by Haredi rioters Eyal Tzipori arrived in predominantly ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak with five passengers and was attacked by mob enraged by police efforts to enforce health regulations; he was rescued by paramedics 'who fought tooth and nail' to save him Ynet| Published: 01.25.21 , 12:14

Public bus driver Eyal Tzipori arrived in Bnei Brak on Sunday night with five passengers, precisely as hundreds of ultra-Orthodox extremists were clashing with police

over the enforcement of coronavirus restrictions and crackdowns on unauthorized gatherings at synagogues and Haredi educational institutions.

Tzipori says and his passengers fled the bus when a group of youths started bombarding it with stones. With an apparent lack of police on the scene, the rioters then boarded the bus and set it on fire.

"I had a sense that if I had stayed, I would have died. That would have been the end of my life," says Tzipori.

"In the moment you can't really comprehend that someone is throwing stones at you. I thought they would stop there, but they didn't. I was taken to hospital by two Magen David Adom paramedics who fought tooth and nail to get me out."

Deputy Transportation Minister Uri Maklev, a member of the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism Party who was born in Bnei Brak, condemned the arson as "pure delinquency."

"We go to great pains to ensure the safety of our drivers and passengers," he said Monday.

"What happened on Sunday night was pure delinquency. The rioters who attacked the bus driver must all face the full force of the law. We understand the plight of the drivers and are in constant contact with them to create a safe atmosphere for them."

Following the riots in Bnei Brak, the Transportation Ministry instructed all bus companies to avoid entering certain neighborhoods in the city.

The police arrested four suspects after Sunday's riots, which also saw rioters throw stones at other vehicles including the car of Bnei Brak Mayor Avraham Rubinstein.

According to an eye witness, hundreds of rioters surrounded Rubinstein's car and he was only able to leave after tear gas was used on the mob.

"On Sunday night we had to deal with serious disturbances in the city of Bnei Brak, in which lawbreakers attacked civilians and caused extensive damage to property, including setting fire to a bus while attempting to harm emergency and rescue personnel and endangering the entire law-abiding population," Israel Police said in a statement.

"In a targeted operation, police forces from Bnei Brak, reinforced by additional police officers from all over the district, dispersed the rioting crowd. We are working to identify the offenders and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law."

At an emergency meeting held Sunday night at Bnei Brak municipality, United Torah Judaism MK Moshe Gafni said he had received a message from the spiritual leader of the Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox community Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky.

"He told me to say on his behalf that these demonstrations should stop and he also urged the police to stop the terrible things that they are doing to the residents of Bnei Brak," said Gafni.

"This is a very difficult time with surging infection rates throughout the country, including the ultra-Orthodox public, and unfortunately we see that it is harming young people, mothers and babies."

01.25.21

UK variant forces Airports closed a month & nationwide lockdown to Jan 31 starting Tuesday

01.25.21

Ben Gurion Airport must stay shut for a month, says public health chief

Dr. Sharon Elrai-Price tells Knesset committee a prolonged ban on international flights is the only way to battle the UK strain of coronavirus, which she said is responsible for the rise in serious cases in Israel despite the decline of daily diagnoses

Nina Fuchs | Published: 01.25.21, 11:57

Israel's public health chief said on Monday that Ben Gurion Airport must stay closed for a month in an effort to battle the spread of new coronavirus variants.

The government on Sunday approved the closure of Israel's main port of entry starting Tuesday until the end of the nationwide lockdown on January 31. The move set to "hermetically seal" the state after UK, South-African and California mutations of COVID-19 were detected in the country.

Head of Public Health Services at the Health Ministry Dr. Sharon Elrai-Price told the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee that a prolonged ban on international flights is the only way to battle the UK strain of coronavirus, which she said has become the predominant.

"We are in a problematic situation, the numbers are starting to go down but we are [the health system] is still very busy," she said. "We are seeing a very rapid spread, at least 50% of the positive tests are the UK variant."

Elrai-Price said the current lockdown together with the shuttering of the airport will allow health services to continue the vaccination campaign. "We must buy time ... I guess we will need a few weeks to allow the vaccination campaign to progress at a rapid pace so the majority of the population is vaccinated."

She said the UK variant seemingly leads to more serious complications than previous strains, especially when it comes to pregnant women and children.

"The UK variant is 50% more contagious," she said. "Some 40% of the infections at the moment are among children and when we came out of the second lockdown, they [the children] were 29% of the infected population. We are seeing an increase in the percentage of infected students in first and fourth grades and we are concerned about that."

01.24.21

No flights lockdown ends next Sunday; task forces watch for local variants

01.24.21

Israel to 'hermetically seal' state as it shuts Ben-Gurion Airport

'We are literally closing, with no commercial flights and nothing save for exceptional circumstances,' PM tells ministers; closure to begin Tuesday and last until third nationwide lockdown ends next Sunday, with only humanitarian flights allowed

Adir Yanko, Itamar Eichner | Published: 01.24.21, 18:19

The government on Sunday approved the closure of Ben-Gurion International Airport, Israel's main port of entry, from Tuesday until the end of the current lockdown aimed at halting the spread of the coronavirus.

The move, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, would "hermetically seal" the state.

The plan approved by the government includes the full closure of the airport until the lockdown ends next Sunday, with the exception of flights for humanitarian purposes and extraordinary circumstances.

It comes in response to the emergence of several new strains of the virus, which are more infectious and potentially more harmful.

"Just in this week of closed skies alone, another million Israelis will be vaccinated," Netanyahu, who had been pushing for the closure, told his government at the start of the meeting on the issue.

"Given the increase in variants, which is leading to a record infection rate and possibly more deaths, I said let's close down first of all," he said.

"Contrary to public discourse, we closed the skies in the normal format from April to August. Now we are literally closing, with no commercial flights and nothing save for exceptional circumstances. First of all, we close."

The prime minister had originally been seeking to close the airport for two weeks, following consultations with Health Ministry officials and the National Security Council late Saturday over the spread of mutated coronavirus strains.

"I realized the issue of the urgency due to the mutations [of the virus] in the world. Not only are the variants out there... it's enough that one comes in and we did not catch it," he said earlier Sunday.

Israel in the midst of a massive push to vaccinate the entire adult population as swiftly as possible. So far, some 25% of the total population has received at least the first dose of the two-stage vaccine and close to 10% had already received the second jab.

Health Ministry officials warned the variants cause more severe illness, which is not always detected by existing testing methods after six pregnant women hospitalized in serious condition with COVID-19 were found to be infected by the new mutation of the virus first seen in Britain.

"Our central viral laboratory has thus far received 10 samples from pregnant women suffering from COVID-19. We have completed the DNA sequencing of seven of those samples and found six of them to be of the British variant," a ministry official said.

The ministry is urging pregnant women to get vaccinated for coronavirus as soon as possible.

The Military Intelligence coronavirus task force working with the Health Ministry to combat the spread of the virus has warned that a local variant may also appear.

01.24.21

Jerusalem works to incorporate components as US Biden NSA rejoin Iran deal

01.24.21

Biden NSA: U.S. will work with Israel to build on normalization deals

Jake Sullivan's office says he and Israeli counterpart Meir Ben-Shabbat 'discussed opportunities to enhance partnership over coming months' with American official extending invitation to begin strategic dialogue in near term

News Agencies| Published: 01.24.21 , 17:43

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration will work closely with Israel on regional security issues and to build on the country's regional normalization agreements, new White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told Israeli counterpart Meir Ben-Shabbat, according to a statement on Sunday.

"They discussed opportunities to enhance the partnership over the coming months, including by building on the success of Israel's normalization arrangements with UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco," according to a statement on Sullivan's call on Saturday with Ben-Shabbat.

Sullivan also extended an invitation to begin a strategic dialogue in the near term, the statement said.

Israel on Sunday approved its normalization agreement with Morocco, the most recent of its 2020 treaties with four Arab states. The other agreements were signed with the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan.

Biden's designated secretary of state, Antony Blinken, also told senators at his confirmation hearing last week that the State Department will hold consultations with Israel and other allies before returning to the Iranian nuclear agreement.

Israel's Channel 12 reported Sunday that the head of the Mossad intelligence agency Yossi Cohen is set to meet with Biden next month, in order to present Jerusalem's position on any new version of the Iran nuclear deal.

The source of the Channel 12 report was not clear.

According to the report, Cohen is also expected to present Biden and senior U.S. defense officials, including the newly appointed CIA chief David Cohen, updated information on Iran's secretive nuclear program.

He will reportedly be accompanied by officials from the defense and foreign ministries.

The intelligence chief was also reportedly expected to ask that the new administration compel Iran to heavily restrict their nuclear program, in light of Tehran's ongoing breaches of the 2015 deal.

In 2018, former president Donald Trump withdrew from the agreement brokered by his predecessor Barack Obama and long criticized by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Biden said before he took office that he wanted to use the previous agreement as a starting point from which to “tighten and lengthen Iran’s nuclear constraints, as we address [its] missile program.”

Should the U.S. rejoin the deal, Channel 12 said, Jerusalem wants Washington to incorporate a number of core components into the agreement to ensure Israel's national security.

01.24.21

Israel relations with Morocco will endorse their Western Sahara sovereignty

01.24.21

Israel approves agreement to upgrade ties with Morocco

Normalization deal pending ratification by Knesset; Jerusalem and Rabat also reach agreement to promote trade and economic collaboration in fields including regulation and innovation, set to be signed within two weeks

Reuters| Published: 01.24.21 , 17:12

Israel's government on Sunday approved a deal to upgrade its ties with Morocco, the fourth Arab country it forged relations with in a parting foreign policy push by the former Trump administration, N12 news reported.

The agreement will now go to Knesset for ratification.

Last month, Morocco followed the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan in moving towards normal relations with Israel in deals brokered in 2020 by the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump.

Palestinians have censured the accords, seeing a betrayal of a long-standing demand that Israel first meets their demand for statehood.

As the Trump administration sought to isolate Israel's arch-enemy Iran, the deals were sweetened with promises of business opportunities or economic aid.

Israel's new partners have also enjoyed bilateral benefits from Washington - in Rabat's case, U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

The Economy Ministry announced on Sunday that the countries have reached an agreement to promote trade and economic collaboration in fields including regulation and innovation.

The ministry said both sides were interested in signing the deal in about two weeks.

The UAE on Sunday approved establishing an embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel's business center.

Israel and the UAE agreed to normalize relations in August.

01.24.21

Saturday raid: 250 officers arrested 145 of two warring Galilee Arab families

01.24.21

145 arrested in police crackdown on violence in Arab sector

Mass raid in Galilee's Tur'an council comes after ongoing clashes between two local families over political appointment; community slams state failures in tackling issue, which has seen 10 killings since the start of year alone

Hassan Shaalan | Published: 01.24.21 , 15:33

Israel Police forces have arrested 145 men in a mass raid in the predominantly Arab regional council of Tur'an in the Galilee on suspicion of violent behavior, arson and illegal use of firearms.

The raid was carried out overnight Saturday and involved 250 officers from both the Border Police and the Police Special Patrol Unit, which specializes in riot and crowd control.

The raid was part of efforts to crack down on widespread violence in Tur'an. Much of the violence is believed to be due to a conflict between two warring local families, the Dahlas and Aduis, which erupted after Mazen Adui was elected as the local council leader in October 2018.

The conflict has already claimed the lives of two residents, Falah Dahla, who was killed while trying to end a large-scale brawl in November 2019, and Mahmoud Mayid Adui, the nephew of the council leader, who was shot near his home in May 2020.

The police said following the raid that it "takes all violent incidents very seriously and in particular those involving public officials."

It vowed to "use all means to find these violent criminals and bring them to justice."

The police also urged local residents and leaders "to stop fanning the flames, take responsibility and act immediately to ease tensions in order to restore calm to the area."

Another 11 people from Tur'an were arrested over the weekend. Some were detained while carrying weapons that included a submachine gun, a handgun, Molotov cocktails and a grenade.

Tur'an residents say the local council leader has chosen not to intervene in the violence and that a 24-hour police presence has failed to curb the violence.

"I am afraid to leave the house to buy bread for the children because of the danger.

Anyone entering the community thinks we are in the middle of war," said one Tur'an resident.

"Everything is in ruins and there is no one to help us. We are tired, we want to return to the life we lost. We feel like we are in prison."

In the past week alone, dozens of violent incidents have taken place in Tur'an, including a shooting that left a local resident moderately wounded, arson attacks on buildings and vehicles and a grenade being hurled in the streets.

Israel's Arab population has long been battling growing violence in their communities, which have seen 10 murders since the start of 2021.

The most recent incident came Tuesday, with the killing of 21-year-old Mohammad Agbaria in the city of Umm al-Fahm.

Slamming the country's failure to tackle the violence in their community, Umm al-Fahm Mayor Samir Sobhi Mahameed and Ar'ara Mayor Modar Younis threatened to resign their positions unless a solution was found.

01.24.21

One dose to over 25% of 9 million, Israel expands to teens to enable exams

01.24.21

Israel includes teens in vaccination drive, eyeing matriculation exams

As it adds 11th and 12th graders to the campaign to inoculate entire population, Education Minister Yoav Galant says it is too early to know if schools will reopen next month as Israel comes out of its third national lockdown

Reuters| Published: 01.24.21 , 16:53

Israel expanded its COVID-19 vaccination drive on Sunday to include 16- to 18-year-olds in what the government described as an effort to enable their attendance at school exams.

Israel, which has the world's fastest vaccine distribution rate, is hoping to begin reopening its economy next month.

With regular imports of Pfizer Inc. vaccines, Israel has administered at least one dose to more than 25% of its 9 million population since Dec. 19, the Health Ministry says.

The vaccines were initially limited to the elderly and other high-risk categories, but are now available to anyone over 40 or - with parental permission - those between 16 and 18. The inclusion of 11th and 12th graders is meant "to enable their return [to school] and the orderly holding of exams," an Education Ministry spokesperson said.

Israel awards a bagrut matriculation certificate to high school students in grades 10-12 who pass exams administered by the Education Ministry.

The results of those exams play a major role in acceptance to university and can also affect placement in the Israel Defense Forces, where many Israelis do compulsory service after high school.

The country has been under a third national lockdown since Dec. 27, which it plans to lift at the end of January.

Education Minister Yoav Galant told Ynet on Sunday that it was too early to know if schools would reopen next month. He said factors deciding this included how much Israel, which is struggling against a surge of infections, was affected by the contagious variant of the virus first detected in Britain.

Health Ministry Director-General Prof. Hezi Levi was asked Sunday in an Army Radio interview whether vaccinating teens might pose unforeseen risks - perhaps to their own yet-unborn children.

"I don't know," Levi said. "This vaccine is no different to vaccines against other viral diseases... and was successfully tested for side effects."

He added that he had no doubt that - weighing the relative risks from the coronavirus - it was preferable to get the vaccine.

01.21.21

British, French & Vatican welcome US decision to rejoin Paris climate accord

01.21.21

World leaders laud U.S. return to climate fight under Biden

Statesmen welcome incoming POTUS' decision to rejoin the Paris climate accord, reversing a key Trump policy in the first hours of his presidency, pledge to work in tandem to tackle climate change

Associated Press| Published: 01.21.21 , 19:19

World leaders breathed an audible sigh of relief that the United States under President Joe Biden is rejoining the global effort to curb climate change, a cause that his predecessor, Donald Trump, had shunned.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and French President Emmanuel Macron were among those welcoming Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris climate accord, reversing a key Trump policy in the first hours of his presidency Wednesday.

"Rejoining the Paris Agreement is hugely positive news," Johnson wrote on Twitter. Britain, which is hosting this year's UN climate summit, looked forward to working with the Biden administration on the issue, he said.

Macron likewise tweeted his joy at the U.S. rejoining the Paris pact, saying that with Biden, "we will be stronger to face the challenges of our time. Stronger to build our future. Stronger to protect our planet."

The accord, forged in the French capital in 2015, commits countries to put forward plans for reducing their emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, which is released from burning fossil fuels.

Former President Donald Trump had questioned the scientific warnings about man-made global warming, at times accusing other countries of using the Paris accord as a club to hurt Washington. The U.S. formally left the pact in November.

By contrast, Biden put the fight against climate change at the center of his presidential campaign and on Wednesday immediately launched a series of climate-friendly efforts to bring Washington back in step with the rest of the world on the issue.

"A cry for survival comes from the planet itself," Biden said in his inaugural address. "A cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear now."

Experts say any international efforts to keep global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit), ideally 1.5C (2.7F), as agreed in the Paris accord would struggle without the contribution of the U.S., which is the world's second-biggest carbon emitter. Scientists say time is running out to reach that goal because the world has already warmed 1.2 C (2.2 F) since pre-industrial times.

Italy said the U.S. return to the Paris accord would help other countries reach their own climate commitments. "Italy looks forward to working with the U.S. to build a sustainable planet and ensure a better future for the next generations," Premier Giuseppe Conte tweeted.

The Vatican, too, was clearly pleased given the decision aligns with Pope Francis' environmental agenda and belief in multilateral diplomacy. In a front-page editorial in Wednesday's L'Osservatore Romano, Vatican deputy editorial director Alessandro Gisotti noted that Biden's decision to rejoin Paris "converges with Pope Francis' commitment in favor of the custody of our common home."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was more muted in her reaction, noting merely that her government would "probably have a more similar opinion" with Biden on issues such as the Paris climate accord, migration and the World Health Organization.

Merkel's conservative Union bloc has close ties to the German auto industry that's fought against tougher emissions rules for cars. Her potential successor, Armin Laschet, has defended the continued mining of coal in his home state even as Germany phases out the fossil fuel by 2038.

Germany's Environment Minister Svenja Schulze, of the center-left Social Democrats, voiced greater excitement at Biden's move. "The U.S. is rejoining the fight against the climate crisis with great verve and enthusiasm," Schulze said, adding that she hoped the new U.S. administration would use the upcoming global summit to "reinforce their pursuit of climate neutrality with a concrete intermediate target for 2030."

Youth activists, who have been at the forefront of demanding leaders take the threat of global warming seriously, said they now want to see concrete action from Washington.

"Many countries signed the Paris Agreement and they are still part of the Paris Agreement, but they make very free interpretations of what that implies," said Juan Aguilera, one of the organizers of the Fridays for Future movement in Spain. "In many cases, signing it has become a show, because at the end of the day the concrete measures that are being taken, at least in the short term, are not satisfactory."

Biden has appointed a large team to tackle climate change both on the domestic and international front. Former Secretary of State John Kerry, named as the president's special climate envoy, on Thursday took part in a virtual event with Italian industry at which he touted the "green economy" as an engine for jobs and said the U.S. planned to make up for time lost over the past four years.

Organizers of a meeting Monday on adapting to climate change said they **hoped Kerry would take part too**, and Biden himself has talked about inviting world leaders to a summit on the issue within his first 100 days in office.

Over the coming months, U.S. allies and rivals will closely watch to see how much the administration offers to cut its emissions in the coming decade. A firm number is expected to be announced before the **UN climate summit** taking place in **Glasgow, Scotland, in November**.