

## POLITICAL STALEMATE IN ISRAEL

## Lapid enlists Gantz, moves closer to oust Netanyahu

AGENCIES

Israel's opposition leader yesterday moved closer to unseating Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and forming a new government after agreeing terms with several parties including one led by Defence Minister Benny Gantz, a spokesman said.

During a 12-year run in top office, Netanyahu has been an often polarising figure at home and abroad. An end to his tenure may bring reprieve from domestic political turmoil, but major shifts in Israel's foreign policy appear less likely from the staunch US ally.

Yair Lapid, a centrist tasked with forming the next governing coalition after the conservative Netanyahu failed to do so in the wake of an inconclusive March 23 election, has until midnight (2100 GMT) to present a final slate.

Lapid, a 57-year-old former TV host and author, has yet to clinch a deal with his main partner, nationalist Naftali Bennett, who would serve as premier first under a proposed rotation between the two men.

Lapid's Yesh Atid party and Gantz's centrist Blue and White said in a joint statement they had "agreed on the outlines of the government".

Gantz would remain defence minister in the new cabinet, the parties said.

Netanyahu, 71, has sought to discredit

Bennett and two other rightists negotiating with Lapid, saying they were endangering Israel's security - an allusion to efforts to curb Iran's nuclear programme and manage ever-fraught Palestinian ties.

Keeping the door open to them, Israel's longest-serving leader, who was first elected prime minister a quarter-century ago, says he is still capable of forming the next government.

Deals have also been reached with the left-wing Meretz and centre-left Labour parties as well as with former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman's nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, a Lapid spokesman said.

The United Arab List was also negotiating to join the coalition. If it does, it would be the first time in Israel's history that an independent Arab party becomes a member of the government.

A source involved in the Lapid-led talks said the proposed new government would try to retain consensus by avoiding hot-button ideological issues such as whether to annex or cede occupied West Bank territory that Palestinians want for a state.

If Lapid misses yesterday's deadline parliament will have three weeks to agree on a new candidate. Should that fail, Israel will hold another election, its fifth in some two years.



A Palestinian boy carries a mattress as he walks amid the debris of a house destroyed in Israeli air strikes during Israeli-Palestinian fighting, in Gaza City, yesterday. The 11-day fighting between Israel and Hamas erupted on May 10 killing 253 Palestinians. Palestinian rockets and missiles killed 13 people in Israel.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## UK reports no new Covid deaths

AGENCIES

Britain recorded no new deaths from Covid-19 on Tuesday, a big sign of improvement in one of the worst-hit countries, as the World Health Organization voiced deep concern at the situation in South America, warning that outbreaks in the already hard-hit region were once again worsening.

The pandemic has killed at least 3,681,985 people worldwide since the virus first emerged in December 2019, according to an AFP compilation of official data.

The US is the worst-affected country with 595,213 deaths, followed by Brazil with 465,199, India with 335,102, Mexico with 227,840, Peru with 184,507 and Britain with 127,782.

The last time Britain recorded no deaths was in March 2020, before the country had entered its first lockdown.

But health minister Matt Hancock warned against complacency saying "we haven't beaten this virus yet."

Meanwhile, the WHO's emergencies chief Michael Ryan said eight of the 10 countries reporting the coronavirus highest mortality rates in the last week were in the Americas.

"The situation in South America right now remains of very high concern," he told reporters.

WHO says South America situation turning in 'wrong direction'

India reports 132,788 new infections, 3,207 deaths

US to detail global distribution plan for 80m vaccine doses

Japan to donate additional \$800m, vaccines to Covax

"South America was really in a difficult situation only a couple of months ago, and that situation again is starting to turn in the wrong direction."

Ryan's comments came after Peru on Monday more than doubled its official coronavirus death toll, becoming the country with the highest Covid-19 mortality per capita anywhere in the world.

Lima said it had raised the count from 69,342 to 180,764 on the advice of a panel of health experts, which found there had been an undercount.

Ryan pointed out that test positivity rates in many South American countries remained "remarkably high", standing at 37 percent in

Paraguay, 33 percent in Argentina and 30 percent in Colombia.

In India, government yesterday reported a daily rise in new coronavirus infections of 132,788 cases over the past 24 hours, while deaths rose by 3,207.

After number of cases skyrocketing for weeks, recently India's situation has shown signs of stabilizing.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that the United States would announce in the next two weeks how it plans to distribute 80 million Covid-19 vaccine doses it has pledged globally.

On Monday, Biden said his administration would send at least 20 million doses of the Pfizer Inc/BioNTech SE, Moderna Inc and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, on top of 60 million AstraZeneca Plc doses he had already planned to give to other countries.

Meanwhile, Japan is planning to pledge an additional \$800 million to the WHO's Covax programme, the Mainichi newspaper reported yesterday.

Japan has already pledged \$200 million to Covax, and the country is expected to announce donations of vaccine doses to the programme, the newspaper said without citing a source.

## UN: Pandemic plunges 100m more workers into poverty

AFP, Geneva

The pandemic has pushed over 100 million more workers into poverty, the UN said yesterday, after working hours plummeted and access to good quality jobs evaporated.

In a report, the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) cautioned that the labour market crisis created by the pandemic was far from over, with employment not expected to bounce back to pre-pandemic levels until 2023 at the earliest.

The ILO's annual World Employment and Social Outlook report indicated that the planet would be 75 million jobs short at the end of this year compared to if the pandemic had not occurred.

And it would still count 23 million fewer jobs by the end of next year.

Covid-19 "has not just been a public health crisis, it's also been an employment and human crisis," ILO chief Guy Ryder told reporters.

The report showed that global unemployment was expected to stand at 205 million people in 2022 -- far higher than the 187 million in 2019.

But the situation is worse than official unemployment figures indicate.

Many people have held onto their jobs but have seen their working hours cut dramatically. In 2020, 8.8 percent of global working hours were lost compared to the fourth quarter of 2019 -- the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs.

While the situation has improved, global working hours have far from bounced back, and the world will still be short the equivalent of 100 million full-time jobs by the end of this year, the report found.

And while global employment is expected to recover more quickly in the second half of 2021 -- provided the overall pandemic situation does not worsen -- the ILO warned that the recovery would be highly uneven. This, it said, was due to inequitable access to Covid-19 vaccines. So far, more than 75 percent of all the jobs have gone to just 10 countries.

Compared to 2019, 108 million more workers around the world were categorised as poor or extremely poor, meaning they and their families live on less than \$3.20 per person per day, the study showed.



Smoke rises from Iran navy's largest ship in Jask port in the Gulf, Iran, yesterday. Iran's largest navy ship the Kharg sank yesterday after catching fire in the Gulf of Oman, but the crew were safely rescued, Iranian media reported. No further explanation was given for the latest incident in a region of sensitive waterways, where there have been accusations of attacks on ships owned by arch-enemies Iran and Israel.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Iran nuke deal parties to wrap up talks in Vienna

REUTERS, Vienna

The remaining parties to the Iran nuclear deal were scheduled to meet in Vienna yesterday, the European Union announced, as diplomats said the meeting will wrap up the latest round of talks on reviving the deal and adjourn discussions for at least a week.

Such meetings of the remaining parties - Iran, Russia, China, France, Britain, Germany and the European Union - in a format known as the Joint Commission have punctuated and bookended indirect talks between Iran and the United States on both countries returning to full compliance with the 2015 deal.

The EU chairs Joint Commission meetings in the basement of a luxury hotel and leads shuttle diplomacy between Iranian envoys and a US delegation based in another luxury hotel across the road. Iran refuses to hold direct talks with Washington.

Talks are expected to be adjourned for at least a week.

Iran's top nuclear negotiator said the barriers to the revival of the deal are complicated but not insurmountable.

"Differences have reached a point where

everyone believes these differences are not insolvable," Abbas Araqchi told Iranian state TV ahead of the meeting.

"But the details are important and Iran's firm positions are important to be observed."

Iran's government spokesman on Tuesday denied that negotiations had stalled with the Islamic Republic's June 18 presidential election less than three weeks away.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's 35-nation Board of Governors holds a quarterly meeting next week, with a number of the delegates at the nuclear talks due to attend.

The UN watchdog Monday voiced concern that Iran had not clarified queries over possible undeclared nuclear activity, adding that its enriched uranium stockpile was 16 times over the limit.

The two reports issued by the IAEA are the first substantive reports since Iran suspended some inspections in February.

Last week the IAEA said it had extended a temporary agreement with Iran until June 24 which has allowed many inspections to continue.



## US risks 'losing a friend'

Erdogan warns before meeting Biden

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has warned that the United States risked "losing a precious friend" if it tries to corner his country, speaking two weeks before his first meeting with US counterpart Joe Biden.

Already tense, relations between the two Nato states have further deteriorated since Biden replaced Erdogan's ally Donald Trump in January, with the new president making a point of highlighting Turkey's dire human rights record.

When asked about Ankara-Washington relations, Erdogan said in an interview with Turkish state broadcaster TRT on Tuesday that "those who corner the Republic of Turkey will lose a precious friend."

Erdogan's combative stance comes ahead of the first meeting between the two leaders on the sidelines of a Nato summit in Brussels on June 14.

Biden was in no rush to speak with the Turkish leader after taking office, waiting three months before calling Erdogan in April.

That call was also on the eve of Biden's historic decision to recognise the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman empire during World War I, a move that outraged Turkey which rejects that term.

He also listed several issues that have strained relations since 2016, including US support for Kurdish militias in Syria that Turkey deems "terrorists".

## Herd of wild elephants approaches China city

REUTERS, Beijing

A herd of 15 wild elephants was approaching the city of Kunming, the capital of southwest China's Yunnan province, yesterday, defying attempts to redirect them after a journey of several hundred kilometres from forests to the south.

The group of Asian elephants, which includes three calves, originally lived in a nature reserve, according to the official Xinhua, and has trekked for nearly 500km along highways and through fields of crops over the past months.

They were within a few kilometres of the edges of Kunming, a city of some 8 million, on the afternoon of June 2, according to state television CCTV.

While it is unclear why the elephants are moving north, the Xinhua report said a decline in edible plants in forest habitats has put pressure on the animals, whose numbers have grown in Yunnan in recent decades.

Conflicts between villagers and elephants can emerge as they leave protected areas to enter villages and eat crops. Some 6.8 million yuan (\$1.1 million) of damage has been caused by this elephant herd, according to Xinhua.

Local governments in Yunnan, which borders Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, have used roadblocks and tonnes of food to try to shift the elephants' course over recent weeks, while evacuating residential areas.

## 'In silence, wounds deepen'

Biden honors victims of 'forgotten' 1921 Tulsa race massacre, 100 years on

AFP, Tulsa

President Joe Biden led emotional commemorations on Tuesday to honor victims of the 1921 race massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, saying the United States must learn from one of the worst episodes of racist violence in the country's history.

The Democratic leader marked the centenary of the massacre by meeting survivors in the city, after the White House announced new initiatives including billions of dollars in grants to address racial disparities in wealth, home ownership and small business ownership.

"This was not a riot, this was a massacre," Biden said to loud applause. "(It was) among the worst in our history -- but not the only one and, for too long, forgotten by our history."

"As soon as it happened, there was a clear effort to erase it from our collective memories... for a long time the schools in Tulsa didn't even teach it, let alone schools elsewhere."

On May 31, 1921, a group of Black men went to the Tulsa courthouse to defend a young African American man accused of assaulting a white woman. They found themselves facing a mob of hundreds of furious white people. Tensions spiked and shots were fired,



and the African Americans retreated to their neighborhood, Greenwood.

The next day, at dawn, white men looted and burned the neighborhood, at the time so prosperous it was called Black Wall Street.

In 2001, a commission created to study the tragedy concluded that Tulsa authorities themselves had armed some of the white rioters.

The mayor of Tulsa formally apologized this week for the city government's failure to protect the community.

Historians say that as many as 300 African American residents lost their lives, and nearly 10,000 people were left homeless.

"I come here to help fill the silence because in

silence, wounds deepen," Biden said.

"As painful as it is, only in remembrance do the wounds heal. We just have to choose to remember (and) memorialize what happened here in Tulsa, so it can't be erased... We simply can't bury pain and trauma forever."

"At some point there'll be a reckoning, an inflection point, like we are facing right now as a nation."

The United States has been embroiled in debate over racism in recent years, fuelled by the killing in 2020 of African American George Floyd, who suffocated under the knee of white Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin.

The killing sparked nationwide protests, and Chauvin's recent conviction for murder was hailed as a milestone against police impunity, but many allege racial injustice and police brutality remain widespread.

The president -- who is popular with Black Americans voters -- also used his speech to slam efforts to undermine voting rights among Black people.

There was "an unprecedented assault on our democracy," he said, vowing to fight for voters' rights. "This sacred right is under assault with incredible intensity like I've never seen."