

Pressure on PM grows, protests affecting talks

Israeli team back in Cairo, evacuees' bid to return to northern Gaza at center of dispute

Analysis **Amos Harel**

Saturday night's nationwide wave of demonstrations reflects a belated escalation in the battle waged by the hostages' families. Anti-government protesters and those seeking to thwart legislation exempting the ultra-Orthodox from army service have also stepped up their activity.

After months of stagnation in the indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas, many of the hostages' families appear to have understood that if there's any chance of getting the talks to move, it is largely in their hands, by upping the pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The current talks are thus taking place under the shadow of demonstrations that, for the first time since the war began, pose a challenge to Netanyahu. It remains to be seen what conclusions Hamas, which is closely following events in Israel, will draw from them.

With the demonstrations heating up and the Tel Aviv police once again responding harshly on Saturday night, the predictable attacks by government mouthpieces began. The protesting families, they argue, are abetting the enemy. If they would just let

Netanyahu do as he pleases, the Israel Defense Forces would soon enter Rafah and lead us to total victory.

But these arguments evidently no longer persuade that majority of Israelis - i.e., those not addicted to Channel 14's brainwashing - who wonder how it is that Netanyahu still hasn't accepted a shred of responsibility for the October 7 massacre.

Soldier dies of Gaza wounds

News, Page 2

Suspensions are growing that Netanyahu wants perpetual war - a war that goes on and on, with no national soul-searching over the question of how we got dragged into it - more than he wants total victory, which in any case isn't visible on the horizon.

The slow pace of the negotiations, Netanyahu's frequent delays and, above all, his ongoing incapacity to show even minimal empathy for the hostages' suffering have finally tipped the scales for many of the captives' families. Einav Zangauker, whose

son Matan is a hostage, expressed this well at Saturday night's demonstration.

"After 176 days, we've realized that you are the obstacle," she told Netanyahu. She then vowed to work for his ouster.

We shouldn't ignore the fact that Hamas, in an attempt to extract even greater concessions from Israel, has also delayed an agreement. And since the negotiations aren't taking place in a vacuum, the organization's leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, might very well see the intensifying demonstrations in Israel as a shot in the arm for his war.

But on the other side of the balance is the hostages' fate. And they, as both political and defense officials noted last week, are gradually slipping away from us. According to the IDF's official count, 36 of the 134 remaining hostages are dead. But it's clear to everyone that the real number is much higher; the army simply hasn't yet amassed enough conclusive proof.

The hostages and their families don't have time. It's true that a deal will require freeing almost 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for some 40 hostages - women, the elderly, the sick and wounded - in the first stage.

See TALKS, Page 2



The mass protest in Jerusalem on Sunday.

Hai Ron

Anti-gov't protests grow: 'Hostages don't get to take recess, but somehow MKs can?'

Bar Peleg, Nir Hasson and Rachel Fink

Ten of thousands of Israelis protested outside the Knesset in Jerusalem on Sunday evening against the Netanyahu government.

Demonstrators called for early elections, for the cancellation of the Knesset's upcoming recess, and for the government to reach a deal with Hamas to secure

the release of Israeli hostages still held in Gaza.

Some of the protesters marched towards several centers in the city, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Residence, while others blocked one of the entrances to the city. Hundreds of protesters block another major road and lit fires. The police used skunk water to disperse them.

Carmit Palty Katzir,

whose brother, Elad, is still held by Hamas, spoke at the rally in front of the Knesset: "I believed that the issue of the hostages was above all else, that there was nothing political about it. I did not believe that I would have to fight against government officials for my brother's right to return home."

Palty Katzir added that her mother, Hanna Katzir, who was also held hostage

and released in the previous deal, "returned from captivity an elderly woman, wounded in body and soul - her life is in danger. She begs with what little strength she has that one person - the prime minister - will bring her son back to her."

Opposition leader Yair Lapid said of the upcoming Knesset recess: "The military reservists don't get to take recess. The hostages

don't get to take recess. You the citizens don't get to take recess. But somehow they can?"

"In what country in the world are such people still in office after what happened to us?" he said. "Anyone who sits in this government today, the responsibility falls on them. Every minister who doesn't

See PROTESTS, Page 2

Netanyahu looking for way to fund Haredi yeshivas, but AG foiling him

Michael Hauser Tov and Chen Maanit

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sought in recent weeks a way around an interim ruling by the High Court of Justice, which demanded that financing be stopped for ultra-Orthodox yeshivas whose students stay out of the IDF.

As part of these efforts,

the prime minister formed a special team tasked with examining a number of alternative funding methods: increasing the budget for students who are eligible for funding; transferring the budgets as coalition funds; or transferring them through local authorities.

As of now, Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara has blocked all the govern-

ment's attempts at circumventing the court's order.

Even before the High Court issued its injunction, the coalition believed that the court would order a stop to the funding of yeshivas. As a result, in February, Netanyahu assembled the group tasked

with finding a way how to get around the ruling.

The team included Justice Minister Yariv Levin, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, Finance Committee Chairman Moshe Gafni and former minister from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, Ariel Atias.

The team met in Netanyahu's office a number of times in order to come up with alternative ways to continue funneling funds to the yeshivas.

Initially, the team examined whether another government agency could transfer funds to students

not eligible for it. Subsequently, Netanyahu and the team looked into the option of transferring the money as coalition funds,

which are subject to less oversight as they are distributed at the behest of politicians. Another option was to funnel the money through local authorities, who will personally support the students called

into the army.

All of these suggestions were vetoed by the attorney general and her representative during the proceedings, Deputy Attorney General Gil Limon. Any one of them, according to Limon, would essentially be the same as keeping the students' funding in the current manner.

Another option Netan-

yahu considered was to increase the share of the budget received by each student, thus compensating the yeshiva for students who are required to enlist. The attorney general ruled that the proposal would be considered a violation of the High Court's interim order.

See AG, Page 4

Eliminating the opposition **Noa Landau Page 5**

Israeli soldiers shooting anyone crossing into 'kill zones' in Gaza



Soldiers in Khan Yunis, in February.

Olivier Fitoussi

Yaniv Kubovich

It was another routine announcement by the Israeli army. Following a rocket launch at Ashkelon, "a terrorist who had fired the rocket was identified and an air force aircraft attacked and eliminated him." Ostensibly, this was another statistic in the roster of dead Hamas militants. However, over a week ago, other documentation of the incident

surfaced on Al-Jazeera. It showed four men, not one, walking together on a wide path, in civilian clothing. There is no one nearby, only the ruins of houses where people once lived. This apocalyptic silence in the Khan Yunis area was shattered by a loud explosion. Two of the men were killed instantly. Two others were wounded and tried to continue walking. Perhaps they thought they had been

saved, but seconds later, a bomb was dropped on one of them. You can then see the other one falling to his knees and then, a boom, fire and smoke.

"This was a very grave incident," a senior Israel Defense Forces officer told Haaretz. "They were unarmed, they didn't endanger our forces in the area in which they were walking." In addition, says an intelligence officer who is famil-

iar with the story, it was not at all certain that they were involved in launching the rocket. He says that they were simply the people who were closest to the launching site - it's possible they were terrorists, it's possible they were civilians out looking for food.

This story is but one example, made public, of the manner in which Palestinians are killed by IDF gunfire in the Gaza Strip. The number of dead Gazans is now estimated to be over 32,000. According to the army, some 9,000 of these are terrorists. However, a host of reserve and standing army commanders who have talked to Haaretz cast doubt on the claim that all of these were terrorists. They imply that the definition of terrorist is open to a wide range of interpretation. It's quite possible that Palestinians who never held a gun in their lives were elevated to the rank of "terrorist" posthumously, at least by the IDF. "In practice, a terrorist is anyone the IDF has killed in the areas in which its forces operate," says a reserve officer who has served in Gaza.

See KILL, Page 7

HAARETZ Online now

Not laughing anymore 'SNL' host calls to free Palestine and release hostages

Israelis in N.Y.C. join protests Rallies in U.S. call for ouster of Prime Minister Netanyahu



Emil Salman

haaretz.com

Army changes position

IDF lets Galilee high schools reopen, parents are unconvinced

Shira Kadari-Ovadia

Communities in the Upper Galilee have been debating in recent weeks whether two high schools in the area should resume full operations, and whether they should close the impoverished offshoots serving the south currently serving the teenage residents.

The Israel Defense Forces recently changed its position on the matter, saying there is no reason not to reopen the two schools - Einot Hayarden, located in Kibbutz Amir, and Emek Hahula, located in Kibbutz Kfar Blum. But not all parents are satisfied with this decision. Some are worried about the trip to and from school, and also about the fact that the schools aren't fully protected against rockets.

Some Upper Galilee communities have been fully evacuated due to their proximity to the northern border. In others, some residents have chosen to leave even though there was no official evacuation order, while the northern communities farthest from the border remain fully inhabited.

This division has caused quite a bit of chaos in the ar-

ea's education system in recent months. All the schools, both elementary and secondary, are currently serving a mix of evacuees (both mandatory and voluntary) and their regular students.

Of the area's four high

variety of temporary frameworks, such as after-hours classes held at elementary schools in those communities. The same is true at Einot Hayarden, which usually has around 500 students but today has only around 200.



Students from evacuated communities.

Omer Naftali

schools, two are very close to the border and won't be reopening any time soon. The dilemma is regarding the other two, both of which are only partially operating.

Normally, 1,200 students attend Emek Hahula, but today, only around 250 are coming to classes from communities very nearby. Students from communities farther south are studying in a

According to the army, all tenth through twelfth graders can now return to those two schools. If they do so, middle school students would be able to move into the mobile classrooms set up in Ramat Korazim currently serving the high-school students. That would enable them to resume normal class hours

See SCHOOLS, Page 7