

International

# Israel government approves new settlement two days before polls

## Netanyahu seeking to boost turnout among his right-wing base

**JERUSALEM:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government approved a new settlement in the occupied West Bank yesterday, his office said, just two days ahead of closely a fought general election. The approval came as Netanyahu and his main opponent Benny Gantz sought to rally supporters, with final rallies planned for yesterday evening.

Netanyahu is seeking to boost turnout among his right-wing base, and he has made a flurry of announcements in recent days that could boost turnout. Yesterday, Netanyahu's cabinet agreed to turn the wildcat settlement of Mevot Yericho in the Jordan Valley into an official settlement, the premier's office said. All settlements are viewed as illegal under international law, but Israel distinguishes between those it has approved and those it has not.

Around 30 families live in the outpost, which was established in 1999. Israeli settlers regularly set up caravan homes at sites in the West Bank with the hope of eventually gaining government approval as a settlement, which has repeatedly occurred. The latest approval follows Netanyahu's pledge last week to annex the Jordan Valley, which amounts to one-third of the West Bank, if he wins Tuesday's elections.

"The government passed the PM's motion to build Mevot Yericho," a statement from Netanyahu's office said as the weekly cabinet meeting was convened ceremoniously in the Jordan Valley. Netanyahu has also said he intends to annex settlements in the wider West Bank, but in coordination with US President Donald Trump, whose long-awaited peace plan is expected to be released after the election.

Israeli attorney general Avichai Mandelblit had initially opposed approving the settlement so close to the election, but changed his opinion after being presented with "diplomatic developments" and other factors, the justice ministry said. The prime minister's annexation plans could destroy any remaining hopes

for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians, the European Union and the United Nations condemned Netanyahu's Jordan Valley announcement last week. Netanyahu said the Jordan Valley annexation would not include Palestinian cities such as Jericho, but they would effectively be encircled by Israeli territory.

### For everyone

Netanyahu is locked in a tough re-election battle with ex-military chief Gantz and his Blue and White centrist alliance, and right-wing nationalist votes are key for his Likud. Some 400,000 Israeli settlers now live in the West Bank alongside around 2.6 million Palestinians. The settlements are viewed as major stumbling blocks to peace as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state. Israel blames Palestinian violence and intransigence as the main obstacles to peace.

Beyond the cabinet approval, Netanyahu and Gantz were making last pitches to voters. "Economic growth is at a record level, as are per capita GDP, tourism and exports. Unemployment is at an all-time low," Netanyahu wrote in Yediot Aharonot newspaper, which gave both candidates space on the front page to express their views. "Anyone who wants to ensure that we will continue to protect Israel, anyone who wants a strong right-wing government under my leadership, has to vote only (Likud)." Gantz argued he can heal divisions in Israeli society that he says Netanyahu has exacerbated.

He spoke of the corruption accusations facing Netanyahu, who could be indicted in the weeks ahead, and of his readiness to form a coalition with far-right parties that could help him seek immunity from prosecution in parliament. "I see what kind of government Netanyahu wants to form: an extremist minority government that would decide for the majority and act



**JORDAN VALLEY, Palestinian Territories:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu poses for a picture with his cabinet ministers in front of a monument after a weekly cabinet meeting in the Jordan Valley, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. —AFP

toward immunity for Netanyahu," Gantz said in an interview with the Walla news site.

"There's a new option in Israeli society—a majority government for everyone," Netanyahu, who has been prime minister for a total of more than 13 years, is seeking to overcome one of the biggest failures of his

political career following April elections. In those polls, Likud along with its right-wing and religious allies won a majority of seats, but he failed to form a coalition government and opted for a second election as a result. Opinion polls show results are likely to again be close. —AFP

## Coalition says 'good progress' in north Syria buffer zone

**TAL ABYAD, Syria:** The US-led coalition said yesterday that "good progress" was being made in implementing a buffer zone in northern Syria along the Turkish border. Turkey and the United States last month agreed on the so-called "security mechanism" to create a buffer between the Turkish border and Syrian areas controlled by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

The YPG led the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in battle against the Islamic State group in Syria, but Ankara views the Kurdish fighters as "terrorists". The United States and Turkey launched their first joint patrol of the border areas on September 8, but Ankara has accused Washington of stalling in the week since. A coalition delegation yesterday visited a military council in the northern town of Tal

Abyad, from which Kurdish forces started withdrawing late last month.

"We are seeing good progress for the initial phase of security mechanism activities," the coalition said in a statement handed out to journalists. "The coalition and SDF have conducted multiple patrols to identify and remove fortifications to address concerns from Turkey," the statement said. "Four joint US and Turkish military overflights" were also carried out, it said.

Little is known about the buffer zone's size or how it will work, although Ankara has said there would be observation posts and joint patrols. "We will continue our talks and close coordination with Turkey to work out additional details for security mechanism activities," the coalition statement said. "We will continue the removal of certain fortifications in the security mechanism area of concern to Turkey," it said.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened to go his "own way" if the buffer zone was not set up by the end of September "with our own soldiers". Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on Tuesday belittled efforts to create the safe zone as largely "cosmetic". Syria's Kurds have established a semi-autonomous region in northeast-



**TAL ABYAD:** Members of the US-led coalition forces shake hands with local forces from the Tal Abyad military council in the northern Syrian town of Tal Abyad. —AFP

ern Syria during the country's eight-year war.

Erdogan has repeatedly threatened to attack Kurdish-held areas in northern Syria, and the prospect of a US withdrawal after the territorial defeat of IS in March again stoked fears of an incursion. Damascus labelled the first

patrol last week as a flagrant "aggression" that seeks to prolong Syria's war. Turkey has already carried out two cross-border incursions into Syria, the latest of which saw Turkish troops and Ankara's Syrian rebel proxies seize the northwestern enclave of Afrin last year. —AFP

## 36 people missing after boat sinks in Congo river

**KINSHASA:** Thirty-six people are missing after a boat sank in the Congo river on the outskirts of Kinshasa, DR Congo police said yesterday. The vessel, which was travelling to the capital, went down overnight in Maluku commune, about 100 kilometers from the centre of the city. Seventy-six people survived, police wrote on Twitter. "The cause of the accident is not yet known," police spokesperson Colonel Pierrot-Rombaut Mwanamputu told AFP. Lake and river transport is widely used in Democratic Republic of Congo as the highway system is poor, but accidents are common, often caused by overloading and the unsafe state of vessels. —AFP

## Zimbabwe doctors' leader 'kidnapped'

**HARARE:** Union activists and rights campaigners yesterday accused Zimbabwe's security forces of kidnapping the leader of a doctors' union, who disappeared during a strike he had helped organize. The Zimbabwe Hospital Doctor's Association (ZHDA) said Peter Magombeyi had not been heard from since he sent a WhatsApp message on Saturday night saying he had been "kidnapped by three men". The ZHDA accused the security forces of abducting him because of his role in organising the work stoppages.

A few dozen doctors and nurses, who are paid less than \$200 a month, marched yesterday in Harare to protest his disappearance. Captions on the improvised placards included "Free Dr Magombeyi unharmed now" and "No Dr Peter, no work: simple". Striking doctors are demanding pay rises in a country still struggling with high inflation and fuel and food shortages after decades

of economic crisis under former president Robert Mugabe, who died a week ago.

"Efforts to reach him after he had sent the alarming message have been fruitless," the ZHDA said in a statement, calling for his release and for medics to protest. Before he disappeared, Magombeyi had said he had received threatening calls and messages on his phone. Zimbabwe Human Rights Lawyers association called for his release. "Expressing their concerns on poor working conditions is a right not a privilege," it said. A Zimbabwe police spokesman did not immediately respond to the allegations.

Zimbabwe's once-vaunted public health system has deteriorated after years of neglect under the Mugabe regime, and doctors complain about lack of supplies and poor conditions. President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was elected to replace Mugabe after he was ousted in 2017, has been under pressure to deliver on promises of more investment and jobs. A measure to double fuel prices this year sparked nationwide protests, prompting a crackdown on the opposition and clashes in which 17 people were killed when soldiers opened fire. —AFP

## South Africa dispatches emissaries to calm xenophobia fears

**JOHANNESBURG:** South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has sent high-ranking emissaries on a mission to reassure African countries after a wave of xenophobic attacks, the presidency said yesterday. At least 12 people have been killed in the surge of mob violence targeting foreign-owned businesses and homes, mainly in and around Johannesburg since the start of the month. Hundreds of economic migrants from neighboring Zimbabwe and Mozambique have fled to shelters and Nigeria has flown 600 of its citizens

back home after they were targeted in the violence.

The mission, led by former minister Jeff Radeba, left South Africa on Saturday and will visit Nigeria, Niger, Ghana, Senegal, Tanzania, DR Congo and Zambia, the presidency said. Ramaphosa was jeered at on Saturday during his speech at Zimbabwe ex-leader Robert Mugabe's funeral in Harare before he apologized for the attacks, which have been prompted by unemployment and poverty.

"I stand before you as a fellow African to express my regret and apologize for what has happened in our country," Ramaphosa said at the state funeral. His comments were met with cheers and blasts of air horns from the crowd. South Africa, the continent's second largest economy, is a major destination for other African migrants. But they are often targeted by some locals who blame them for a lack of jobs. —AFP



**JOHANNESBURG:** Women hold signs during a civil society groups march against the recent rise of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, in Johannesburg's Central Business District. —AFP

## Israel to decide Netanyahu's fate in election rerun

**JERUSALEM:** Israel holds its second election in five months on Tuesday as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu battles for political survival and the question of how religious the country should become emerges as a surprise issue. Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, suffered one of the biggest defeats of his career after April elections, when he failed to form a coalition despite his right-wing Likud and its allies winning a majority of seats.

Rather than risk having Israeli President Reuven Rivlin choose someone else to form a government, Netanyahu, who could be indicted on corruption charges in the coming weeks, opted for a second election instead. Final opinion polls released Friday indicate another tight race between Likud and the centrist Blue and White alliance led by ex-military chief Benny Gantz, and a repeat stalemate cannot be ruled out. Voter turnout amid election fatigue will be a key factor along with the surprising emergence of issues related to religion and the state.

And once again, the poll will to a large degree amount to a referendum on Netanyahu. The premier's controversial pledge to annex one-third of the occupied West Bank if he wins and his brief escort off stage at a rally due to rocket fire from Gaza have been among the issues dominating the campaign's final days. "If there's anyone who can affect President (Donald) Trump and the Congress and public opinion in the US—that's the real power there," Netanyahu said in a Friday television interview during which he sought to burnish his leadership credentials.

"How do you think I have these achievements? ... It's the experience." His rival Gantz has talked up his security experience and sought to portray himself as someone who can restore dignity to the premier's office, a reference to the corruption cases against his opponent. "I'm telling you, we'll beat him," Gantz said in his own Friday television interview. "I'm here to change the country. Bibi's end is a necessary part of it," he added, using Netanyahu's nickname.

### Trump, Putin posters

Regardless of how many seats in the 120-seat parliament each win-polls show around 30 — a coalition will be necessary, and former defense minister Avigdor Lieberman could be kingmaker. Lieberman and his nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party have touched a nerve with their campaign against the country's ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties, an influential part of Netanyahu's coalition.

He accuses them of seeking to impose Jewish religious law on Israel's secular population and wants legislation ending the ultra-Orthodox's exemption from mandatory military service. Polls show he has gained in popularity as a result. That could allow him to decide who is granted the opportunity to form the next government—and whether his old nemesis Netanyahu can seek immunity from prosecution in parliament, as many expect.

Netanyahu has pushed to energise his base, including through tactics critics say amount to racism. His Likud party has issued unfounded warnings that the election could be stolen through voter fraud in Arab areas, and Netanyahu sought last-minute legislation to allow party officials to bring cameras to polling stations. The legislation, which ultimately failed, was widely seen as a bid to depress Arab turnout by intimidating members of the minority into staying away. —AFP