

Cabinet declares Bnei Brak 'restricted zone,' will do same for other epicenters

The cabinet voted on Thursday to declare Bnei Brak a "restricted zone" in a measure that will further hinder movement in and out of the predominantly ultra-Orthodox city that has become Israel's largest hotspot for the coronavirus, The Times of Israel reports.

The move will limit entrance to residents, police, rescue services, those bringing essential supplies and journalists and will initially last for seven days, with the option to be extended by ministers by five days at a time.

With a population of 200,000, Bnei Brak has seen the second-highest number of infections of all Israeli cities and the highest rate per capita by far.

The cabinet also approved the formation of a ministerial committee headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that will be charged with determining whether additional towns should be declared "restriction zones" in order to curb the outbreak.

One of the towns mentioned by the Health Minister Thursday was the ultra-Orthodox city of Elad, which has seen dozens of confirmed cases.

Ministers also approved a measure requiring anyone returning from abroad, who does not have somewhere to isolate for two weeks according to Health Ministry guidelines, to be placed in a state-run isolation facility.

The cabinet authorized chief district physicians and HMO heads to order patients placed in state-run isolation facilities, if they deem it necessary.

The state will provide those who are in its isolation facilities with food and cleaning products, with the latter benefit apparently aimed at reassuring religious Israelis concerned about being able to clean for the Passover holiday.

Netanyahu, much of Israeli top brass in quarantine as health minister gets virus

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and some of Israel's other top officials in managing the country's response to the coronavirus crisis will enter quarantine after Health Minister Yaakov Litzman was confirmed to have contracted COVID-19, The Times of Israel reports.

Netanyahu will work from his Jerusalem residence until Wednesday in accordance with Health Ministry instructions and the advice of his personal physician, Dr. Tzvi Berkowitz, the Prime Minister's office said in a statement.

Health Ministry head Moshe Bar Siman-Tov, who has become the face of Israel's management of the crisis with near daily briefings and media appearances, announced on Thursday morning that he would self-quarantine, due to the contact he had with Litzman in recent days.

Sigal Sadetzki, head of public health at the Health Ministry, will also enter a two-week period of home isolation, since she recently met with Litzman.

Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen, whose spy agency has been instrumental in obtaining medical equipment for Israel, and National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, who has been coordinating the government's response to the pandemic, will also be sent into isolation, according to Hebrew news reports. IDF chief of staff Aviv Kohavi is already working from

quarantine, due to exposure to an infected officer, but has tested negative for the virus.

Under Health Ministry orders, tens of thousands of Israelis are in self-quarantine due to possible exposure to the virus and the entire country is in an almost total lockdown that has seen most of the population confined to their homes, only allowed out for essential needs.

The number of COVID-19 deaths in Israel rose Thursday to 31, and the number of people diagnosed with the coronavirus increased to 6,211.

Netanyahu: All Israelis must wear face masks

All Israelis must wear face masks while in public as a precaution against the coronavirus, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday, Israel Hayom reports.

Netanyahu adding that people could improvise in the absence of factory-produced masks.

Netanyahu also said that upcoming religious holidays, including the Jewish holiday of Passover, should be celebrated only with immediate family members.

Netanyahu vowed to give families at least 500 NIS (\$138) for each child to compensate for the economic cost of the pandemic, which has caused Israeli unemployment levels to spike due to the almost-complete paralysis of economic activity.

At the beginning of March, the unemployment rate in Israel was just 3.9%, considered to be an extremely low rate. Since then it has soared eightfold to 24.1%. In real terms, one in four workers in Israel is now unemployed.

Israel's biological institute reports 'significant progress' on coronavirus vaccine

Israel's defense biological research institute reported on Tuesday that it has made "significant progress" in developing a vaccine against COVID-19 and will soon start testing on animals, The Times of Israel reports.

Still, vaccine development and safety testing for mass public use is expected to take many months.

In early February, before the virus reached Israel, Netanyahu instructed the Israel Institute for Biological Research (IIBR), a secretive unit, to work to create a vaccine against the virus and to establish a vaccine factory.

The IIBR is reportedly involved in developing chemical and biological weapons and antidotes and defenses against them.

There are now more than 50 scientists at the institute working on researching and developing a medical remedy for the virus.

The World Health Organization said last week that at least 20 vaccines are in development for COVID-19. The first clinical trials in humans began on March 16 in the United States.

Coalition talks nearly final

The coalition negotiations between Likud and Blue & White are close to being concluded, sources told Globes Thursday.

According to the sources, the two sides agreed that Avi Nissenkorn of Blue & White will be minister of justice, and the Speaker of the Knesset will be Yuli Edelstein or someone else from Likud.

There will be a "balance of threat" between the sides in the form of a veto on senior appointments such as the next State Attorney, the next commander of the Israel Police, members of the search committee for the next Attorney General, and members of the committee for selecting judges.

A political source involved in the negotiations told Globes that there was

still no agreement by Blue & White to the re-election of Yuli Edelstein as Speaker of the Knesset, but that the party's opposition had diminished after a meeting between Edelstein and Blue & White leader Benny Gantz on Tuesday.

According to the source, Edelstein will be required to publish an apology or some expression of regret for having been in contempt of the High Court of Justice in not complying with the court's order that he should convene the Knesset plenum to choose his replacement, and discussions are taking place on the wording of his statement.

Likud is demanding a veto in the ministerial legislation committee.

The two parties seek to form a government before the Passover holiday next week, but the fact that Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu and other legislators are in isolation complicates the logistics of swearing in the government and the legislation required to facilitate rotation of the premiership between Netanyahu and Gantz.

Verbit scores Harvard deal

As students around the world are transitioning to distance learning, an Israeli startup has inked a deal with Harvard University to make the classroom experience more productive, Israel 21C reports.

Tel Aviv-based Verbit has developed software to transcribe audio into text automatically. Verbit says its artificially intelligent tech can transcribe audio 10 times faster than the competition for half the price – and at 99% accuracy.

Harvard will offer students both the original class video and the text transcriptions. This makes distance learning an attractive option compared

with the classic frontal lecture where students must do their own rapid notetaking.

In January, Verbit announced that it had raised \$31 million of venture funding, bringing its total funding to \$65 million. The company will use the latest funding to add languages to its service, which is now focused on English.

Over and out

Despite the international quarantines and travel restrictions caused by coronavirus, Israel's top rabbinical authority has forbidden Jews from using Zoom or other video conferencing apps so that distant family members can meet for Passover seders, Newsweek reports.

The Chief Rabbinate's disapproval followed the release of a letter last week from a group of Orthodox Sephardic rabbis in Israel which approved of video conferencing specifically for this year's Passover as a way for families to virtually convene despite pandemic-related social distancing measures.

Nevertheless, the Chief Rabbinate issued its own Halachic prohibition on video conferencing on Wednesday.

"The loneliness is painful," the Chief Rabbinate wrote, "and we must respond to it, perhaps even with a video conference on the eve of the holiday before it begins, but not by desecrating the holiday, which is only permitted in cases of *pikuach nefesh* (to save a life)."

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Artzeinu wishes all its readers a kosher and happy Passover. Additionally, we wish a speedy and full recovery to all those suffering from the coronavirus.



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