

Israel launches official probe into deadly festival stampede

Author:

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JERUSALEM: Israel's government approved Sunday the establishment of an independent state commission of inquiry into a deadly disaster at a Jewish holy site in April that left 45 people dead.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said the commission would investigate major safety shortcomings that led to a deadly stampede at Lag Baomer celebrations on Mount Meron.

It will be headed by a current or former senior judge, and its members selected by the country's chief Supreme Court justice.

Some 100,000 people, mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews, gathered for the April 29 holiday festival in northern Israel despite coronavirus restrictions limiting outdoor assemblies to 500 people, and longstanding warnings about the safety of such gatherings. The state comptroller's office had previously issued a pair of reports in 2008 and 2011 warning that the conditions at Mount Meron were dangerous.

Hundreds of people funneled through a narrow passageway descending the mountain's holy site during the festival. A slippery slope caused people to stumble and fall, precipitating a human avalanche that killed 45 people and injured at least 150.

The police launched an investigation into the disaster, but to date have yet to make any arrests.

The government said the commission would investigate the officials "who made the decisions that led to approving the event and determining the framework that was approved and its terms."

Powerful ultra-Orthodox politicians reportedly pressured Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other government officials to lift attendance restrictions at the religious festival.

Experts had long warned the Mount Meron complex was inadequately equipped to handle the enormous crowds that flock there during the springtime holiday, and that existing infrastructure was a safety risk.

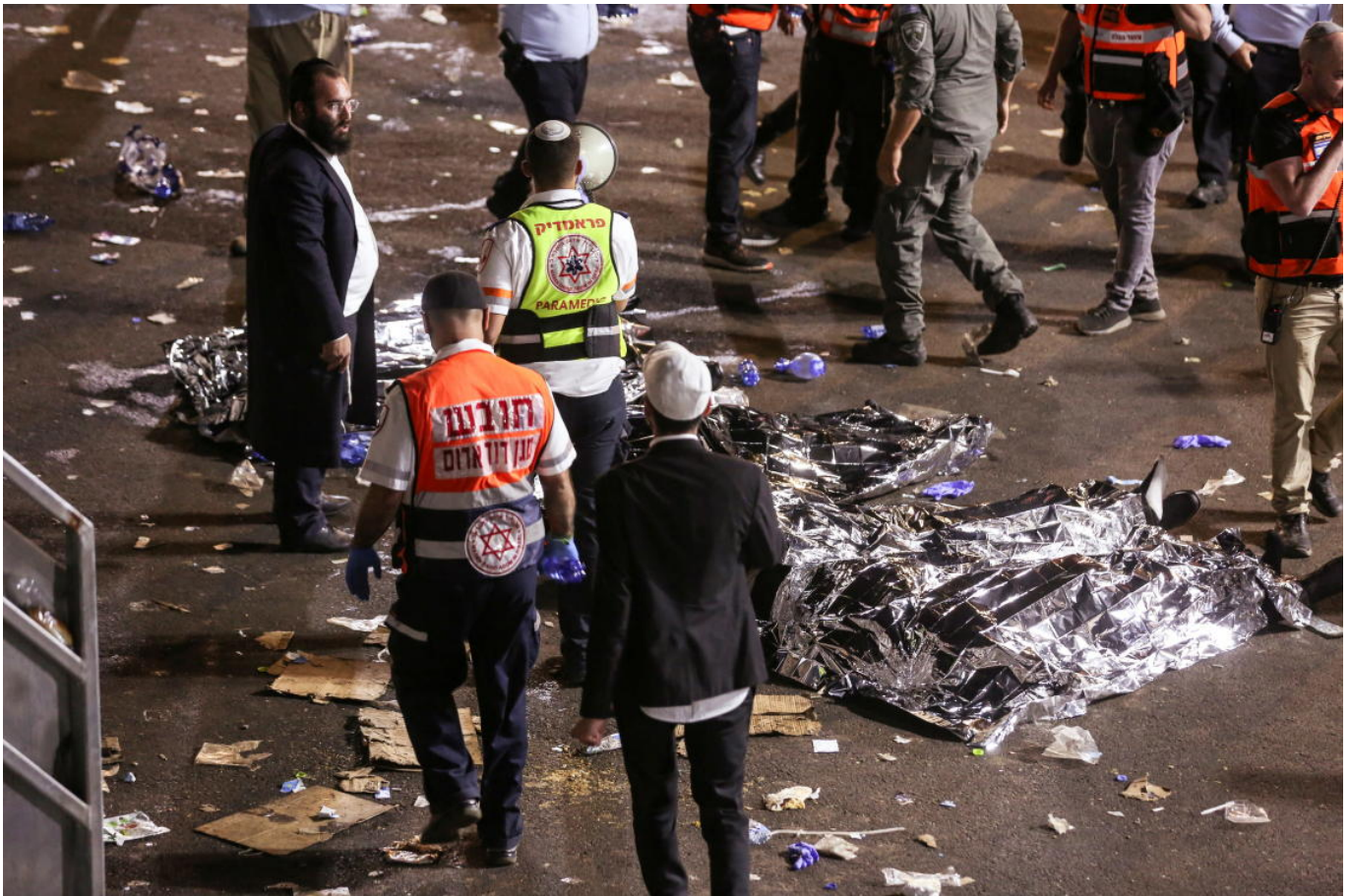
Netanyahu's political allies, including ultra-Orthodox lawmakers, walked out on a Knesset committee hearing that discussed forming an investigation last month. Families of the mostly ultra-Orthodox victims of the disaster had called on Netanyahu to take action and form an independent state commission to investigate the incident.

Bennett said at the start of his newly formed government's first Cabinet meeting that "the responsibility is on our shoulders to learn the lessons to prevent the disaster to come."

"The commission cannot bring back those who died, but the government can do everything to prevent an unnecessary loss in the future," he said.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz, one of the ministers who advanced the motion to

launch the commission, said in a statement: “We must make sure that a tragedy of this nature never repeats itself. The taskforce’s purpose is, above anything else, to save human life.”



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[New compensation offer made over Suez Canal blockage – lawyer](#)

Author:
Reuters
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ISMAILIA: The owners of a giant container ship that blocked the Suez Canal in March have made a new offer in a compensation dispute with the canal authority, a lawyer for the authority said on Sunday.

The Ever Given container ship has been anchored in a lake between two stretches of the canal since it was dislodged on March 29. It had been grounded across the canal for six days, blocking hundreds of ships and disrupting global trade.

The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) demanded \$916 million in compensation to cover

salvage efforts, reputational damage and lost revenue, before publicly lowering the request to \$550 million.

The Ever Given's Japanese owners Shoei Kisen and its insurers have disputed the claim and the ship's detention under an Egyptian court order.

Negotiations had been continuing until Saturday, SCA lawyer Khaled Abu Bakr told a court hearing in Ismailia over the ship's detention.

The ship's owners had put in a new offer, he said, without giving details.

The SCA's chairman previously said Shoei Kisen had offered to pay \$150 million.

The court had been due to rule on the case on Sunday but Shoei Kisen's legal team asked for a postponement to allow more time for negotiations, one of their lawyers said.

This week UK Club, one of the ship's insurers, said it was engaged in "serious and constructive negotiations" with the SCA, and was "hopeful of a positive resolution to these negotiations in the near future."



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[Rocket targets Iraq base hosting US troops: security source](#)

Sun, 2021-06-20 14:32

BAGHDAD: At least one Katyusha rocket fell close to the perimeter of a military base that hosts US troops in northern Iraq on Sunday, Iraq's military said.

The rocket fell near the sprawling Ain al-Asad air base in western Anbar province but did not explode, the military said in a statement.

There was no significant damage, the statement said. An Iraqi security official said a fence at the perimeter of the base was minimally damaged. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

An investigation by security forces found the projectile had been launched from the nearby al-Baghdadi area.

The attack is the latest targeting the American presence in Iraq. Rockets and, more recently, drones have targeted military bases hosting US troops and the US Embassy in the heavily fortified Green Zone in Baghdad.

The regular assaults have been described as disruptive by US contractors working on military bases. Recently, Lockheed Martin relocated its F-16 maintenance teams, citing security concerns.

The US and Iraq are negotiating a timeline for foreign troops to withdraw from the country. Talks began under the former administration of Donald Trump and resumed after President Joe Biden assumed office.



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[Israel says Iran's Raisi extreme, committed to nuclear program](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2021-06-19 18:18

JERUSALEM: Israel on Saturday condemned Iran's newly-elected president Ebrahim Raisi, saying he was its most extreme president yet and committed to quickly advancing Tehran's nuclear program.

"Iran's new president, known as the Butcher of Tehran, is an extremist responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iranians. He is committed to the regime's nuclear ambitions and to its campaign of global terror," Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said on Twitter.

A separate statement from the Israeli Foreign Ministry said Raisi's election should "prompt grave concern among the international community."

Israel's new government, sworn in on Sunday, has said it would object to the revival of a 2015 nuclear deal between world powers and its arch-foe, Iran. Israel sees a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat. Tehran denies seeking nuclear weapons.

Toeing the policy line set by the administration of Israel's former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, the foreign ministry said: "More than ever, Iran's nuclear program must be halted immediately, rolled back entirely and stopped indefinitely."

"Iran's ballistic missile program must be dismantled and its global terror campaign vigorously countered by a broad international coalition."

Raisi, a hard-line judge who is under US sanctions for human rights abuses, secured victory as expected on Saturday in Iran's presidential election after a contest marked by voter apathy over economic hardships and political restrictions.



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Amnesty accuses Iran's newly-elected president of 'crimes against humanity'
Ultraconservative cleric Raisi wins Iran presidential vote

Parties to Iran nuclear deal to hold formal meeting on Sunday: EU

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2021-06-19 17:53

PARIS: Parties negotiating a revival of the Iran nuclear deal will hold a formal meeting in Vienna on Sunday, the European Union said on Saturday. Iran and six world powers have been negotiating in Vienna since April to work out steps for Washington and Tehran to take. The United States withdrew in 2018 from the pact, under which Iran accepted curbs on its nuclear programme in exchange for a lifting of many foreign sanctions against it.

Sunday's formal meeting comes more than a week after this round of talks resumed and is an indication that the talks are likely to be adjourned. Officials over the week have indicated that differences remain on key issues. "The Joint Commission of #JCPOA will meet on Sunday, June 20," Mikhail Ulyanov Russia's envoy to the talks said on Twitter.

"It will decide on the way ahead at the #ViennaTalks. An agreement on restoration of the nuclear deal is within reach but is not finalised yet." The remaining parties to the deal – Iran, Russia, China, France, Britain, Germany and the European Union – meet in the basement of a luxury hotel. The US delegation to the talks is based in a hotel across the street as Iran refuses face-to-face meetings, leaving the other delegations and EU to work as go-betweens.

Since former US President Donald Trump pulled out of the deal and reimposed sanctions on Iran, Tehran has embarked on counter measures, including rebuilding stockpiles of enriched uranium, a potential pathway to nuclear bombs.



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