

Israel

Protests in Israel and strike called amid eruption of outrage over Gaza war

Tens of thousands take to streets as anger rises at Netanyahu government after deaths of six hostages



■ Israelis protest to demand a ceasefire after six more hostages found dead in Gaza - video

Julian Borger in Tel Aviv and Quique Kierszenbaum in Jerusalem

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Tens of thousands of Israelis took to the streets on Sunday night and a general strike was called amid an eruption of public outrage over the government's handling of the war in Gaza after the deaths of six hostages being held deep underground by Hamas.

The discovery of the hostages' bodies in Gaza over the weekend threatened to bring deep divisions over the war to breaking point. An estimated 100,000 protested in Tel Aviv, while others demonstrated in Jerusalem as [pressure on the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to reach a ceasefire deal](#) to bring the remaining hostages home reached a new peak.

The first general strike since March last year is expected to bring large parts of Israel's economy to a halt on Monday. Government and municipal offices were due to close, as well as schools and many private businesses. Israel's international airport, Ben Gurion, is due to shut down at 8am local time (0600 BST) for an unknown period.

On Sunday night, demonstrators cut off the Ayalon highway, the motorway running through the heart of Tel Aviv. They filled the road and lit a bonfire in the middle lane near Hashalom, drumming and singing. A few dozen police officers tried to contain the protest but were unable to push it back.

"Officer, officer, who are you protecting?" the crowd chanted, and then: "Bibi [Netanyahu], you're killing the hostages."

On Sunday, Israel's far-right finance minister Bezalel Smotrich wrote to attorney general Gali Baharav-Miara asking her to seek an injunction against the strike, arguing that it would harm the economy and had no legal basis as its main aim was to influence government policy on state security.

"These issues are ... not the subject of a strike by labour organisations and there is no connection between them and labour relations in Israel," he wrote in his letter to Baharav-Miara.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said the bodies of Carmel Gat, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, Eden Yerushalmi, Alexander Lobanov, Almog Sarusi and Ori Danino were found in tunnels “dozens of metres” underground during fighting in Rafah in southern Gaza. The six were seized during Hamas’s 7 October attacks on Israel.

Israel’s health ministry said a forensic examination of the bodies showed the hostages had been “murdered by Hamas terrorists in a number of shots at close range” 48 to 72 hours before they were found.

However, the findings pointing to Hamas executions did little to deflect widespread fury towards Netanyahu and his rightwing coalition for failing to agree a US-backed hostages-for-peace deal with Hamas, which has been on the negotiating table since late May.

In a statement mourning the six hostages, the prime minister blamed Hamas for refusing to accept the deal.

“Whoever murders abductees does not want a deal,” Netanyahu said. “We, for our part, did not let up. The Israeli government is committed, and I am personally committed, to continue striving for a deal that will return all our abductees and guarantee our security and existence.”



■ Netanyahu: 'Whoever murders hostages does not want a deal' - video

Netanyahu’s claims were undermined by anonymous briefings to the press by security officials on Sunday, blaming his insistence on retaining strategic territory inside [Gaza](#), particularly a strip along the Egyptian border called the Philadelphi corridor, for the failure to reach a breakthrough in the hostage negotiations.

The defence minister, Yoav Gallant, was the only government member to vote against Netanyahu’s stance on the corridor last week and he called on Sunday for the cabinet to reverse its position.

“It is too late for the hostages who were murdered in cold blood,” Gallant said, adding: “We must bring back the hostages that are still being held by Hamas.”

A senior Hamas official, Izzat al-Rishq, blamed the hostages’ deaths on Israel and the US, pointing to Israel’s failure to agree to a ceasefire deal he said Hamas had accepted. Rishq did not make any claims about how the hostages had died and did not comment on IDF suggestions that they had been executed.

An unnamed Hamas official was quoted by Agence France-Presse as saying the hostages had been “killed by the [Israeli] occupation’s fire and bombing”, a claim denied by the IDF and contradicted by the Israeli health ministry’s findings.

Announcing the general strike, the leader of the Histadrut trade union federation, Arnon Bar-David, said: “It is impossible to stand by any more and

look the other way as our children are murdered in the tunnels of Gaza.

“We are no longer one country. This must be stopped. The state of Israel must be returned to normal. We are getting body bags instead of a deal. I have come to the conclusion that only our intervention might move those who need to be moved.”

Israeli schools are expected to send pupils home in late morning on Monday, and a large number of Tel Aviv restaurants and other private enterprises said they would close in solidarity with the public sector and the hostages.

At Sunday night’s demonstration, many protesters were hoping that the country had reached a tipping point.

“Today I woke up and just felt something changed,” said Danielle Galber, a 30-year-old PhD student in neurobiology. “I was heartbroken and angry, and felt: it’s been enough. Our country is falling apart.”

But Galber and her friend, Aaron, thought Monday’s planned general strike would put more pressure on Netanyahu than mere protests. Their workplaces, and those of everyone they knew across the private and public sectors, would be shutting down, but they did not know for how long. “There’s a chance,” Aaron said. “It depends on the strike. That might just push him towards a hostage deal.”

The strike call was welcomed by the Hostage and Missing Families Forum, a group of relatives of the abductees who have led the protest movement and calls for a ceasefire deal.

“Starting tomorrow the country will tremble. We call on the public to prepare to bring the country to a standstill,” the forum said. “These six individuals were taken alive, endured the horrors of captivity, and were then coldly murdered ... A deal for the return of the hostages has been on the table for over two months. Were it not for the delays, sabotage and excuses those whose deaths we learned about this morning would likely still be alive.”



Protesters use megaphones to chant slogans during an anti-government rally in Tel Aviv. Photograph: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

The last time Histadrut called a general strike, in March last year, it was triggered by [Netanyahu’s sacking of Gallant](#) for his opposition to the prime minister’s plans to limit the power and independence of the supreme court. The strike paralysed much of the economy but ended after a few hours when Netanyahu announced he would put his judicial changes on hold and about two weeks later he reversed his decision to sack Gallant.

While tens of thousands gathered to protest in Tel Aviv on Sunday night, thousands more joined the families of hostages in Jerusalem to protest outside Netanyahu’s office during a cabinet meeting. The demonstrators

then marched to Chords light railway bridge and tried to block one of the main entrances to the city until they were forcibly dispersed by police.

Sigi Cohen, whose 26-year-old son, Eliya, is among the hostages still in Gaza, said: "I'm fed up. I want my son at home. Enough already. Enough with this policy.

"Eliya, if you hear me, take care of yourself and be strong. You won't be there for more longer."

Funerals began for the hostages on Sunday, adding more fuel to the popular anger.

"You were abandoned on and on, daily, hour after hour, 331 days," Nira Sarusi said at the funeral of her son, Almog, whose body was wrapped in an Israeli flag. "You and so many beautiful and pure souls. Enough. No more."

Hamas killed 1,200 people in its surprise attack on Israel in October. In the war in Gaza that followed, 40,691 Palestinians have been killed, according to the latest estimate by the Palestinian health ministry.

Of the 250 Israeli hostages seized on 7 October, eight have been rescued and more than 100 were released in an earlier temporary ceasefire deal in November. The discovery of the six bodies leaves 101 hostages still unaccounted for in Gaza. The IDF has confirmed 35 of them are known to have died during the more than 10 months of captivity.

Dalia Cusnir's two brothers-in-law, Eitan and Yair Horn, were abducted that day and are still in Gaza.

"We're done talking," Cusnir said. "Our family members who are being held hostage cannot wait any more, and the government is clearly not doing anything to promote a deal."

Cusnir welcomed the general strike, but also called for millions of Israelis to come out in the streets to support a ceasefire, and for members of Netanyahu's government who do not agree with his policies to stand up to him and threaten the viability of his coalition.

She was dismissive of the government's claim that keeping hold of the Philadelphi corridor was a strategic necessity for Israel.

"All the security chiefs say that in the worst-case scenario, the army knows how to take it back," Cusnir said. "They say it's a strategic thing, but Judaism tells us that there's only one strategic thing and that's life. This is the only thing we cannot lose: ourselves, our values and our essence."

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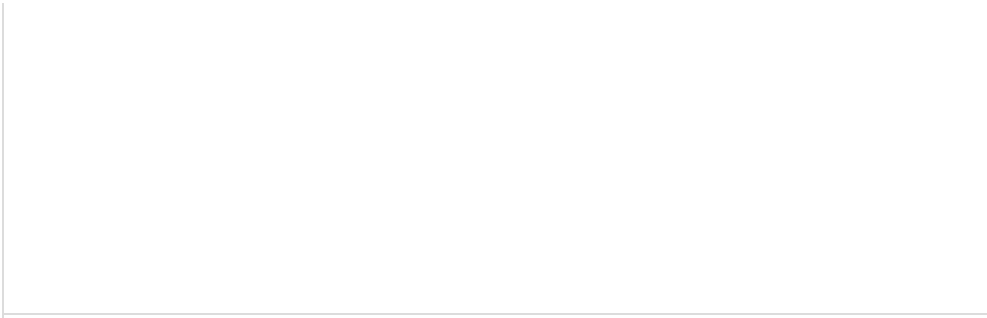
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