

Netanyahu's corruption trial begins in Jerusalem



Jerusalem, May 24 (RHC)-- Benjamin Netanyahu, flanked by aides and officials wearing face masks to prevent coronavirus infection, said he was "standing tall" with his "head held high" and would continue to lead the country. Netanyahu is the first serving Israeli prime minister to face criminal charges, as his trial opens in Jerusalem.

Hundreds of people took part in rival protests in favor of Netanyahu and against him, shortly before his appearance at the court. The prime minister has been charged with fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in a series of cases. He is accused of accepting expensive gifts, such as cartons of champagne and cigars, from wealthy friends and offering favours to media moguls in exchange for favourable news coverage of him and his family.

In the most serious case, he is accused of promoting legislation that delivered hundreds of millions of dollars of profits to the owner of a major telecom company while wielding behind-the-scenes editorial influence over the firm's popular news website.

Netanyahu, who heads the right-wing Likud party, denies all charges. He has cast his prosecution as a left-wing witch-hunt meant to overthrow a popular right-wing leader. When he arrived at the courthouse, Netanyahu revived his claims that he is the victim of a deep state-type conspiracy by media, police, prosecutors and judges out to oust him.

He said police and prosecutors had conspired to "tailor" a case against him, and said the evidence was "contaminated" and exaggerated. He called for the court proceedings to be broadcast live on TV to ensure "full transparency."

"While the media continues to deal with nonsense, with these false, trumped up cases, I will continue to lead the state of Israel and deal with issues that really matter to you," he said, including to resuscitate the economy, and "continue to save the lives of thousands of Israelis ahead of the possibility of a second wave of coronavirus."

Critics have said Netanyahu's arguments have undermined Israel's court system and risk deeper damage its democratic institutions.

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