

Protests resume in Israel after Netanyahu rejects compromise

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Israeli protesters have attempted to disrupt Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's trips abroad by protesting at airports [Tsafrir Abayov/AP Photo]

Tel Aviv, March 16 (RHC)-- Israeli protesters have pressed ahead with demonstrations against a plan by the far-right government to weaken the independence of the judiciary, pushing back against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after he rejected a compromise proposal from President Isaac Herzog that was meant to diffuse the crisis.

Protesters in Jerusalem on Thursday drew a red streak on the streets leading to the country's Supreme Court and a small flotilla of boats was blocking the shipping lane off the coast of the northern city of Haifa.

The drive by Netanyahu's government to enact sweeping changes to Israel's courts has sparked domestic uproar and alarm among the country's Western allies. If the initial proposal passes, it would mean greater government sway in selecting judges and limit the power of the Supreme Court to strike down legislation.

One major point of contention in the planned overhaul is an amendment to the way in which judges are selected. Justice Minister Yariv Levin has said the coalition's proposed measures would change the way judges are appointed by giving the Knesset more oversight and the government more power on the committee which selects them.

Herzog's plan would see the selection committee include three ministers, the president of the high court, two judges and two civil servants who will be agreed upon by the president of the supreme court and the justice minister.

The president warned on Wednesday that Israel was at a turning point and stressed he had been involved in mediation efforts and speaking with "thousands of people" for weeks. "A civil war is a red line," the president said. "I won't let that happen at any cost or any way." He said Israel was "in the depths of a real crisis" but also "in front of a huge opportunity" and "at a fork in the road." "Most Israelis want a plan that will bring both justice and peace," he said.

The government's secretary, Yossi Fuchs, confirmed on Twitter that the coalition did not support the president's plan. "The president's plan is one-sided of the president and has not been agreed upon by any member of the coalition," Fuchs said.

The Israeli president, whose role is largely ceremonial, has been conducting talks in recent weeks to broker a compromise between members of the coalition and those who oppose the judicial changes but has not confirmed that he has support for the plan from legislators.

Netanyahu, who says his aim is to balance out branches of government, wields a parliamentary majority along with his religious-nationalist coalition allies. The Israeli premier said he was shortening a scheduled trip to Berlin. A preliminary itinerary circulated last week said he would return on Friday. But the new statement said he would return on Thursday.

Netanyahu also delayed his flight to Berlin as he was in talks with coalition members over possible amendments to the planned judicial changes, several Hebrew media outlets reported.

Hundreds of protesters arrived at the airport in an attempt to disrupt the prime minister's departure to Berlin on Wednesday. Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich announced he was shortening a planned trip to Panama, instead deciding to return to Israel on Wednesday evening to "guide a process of legislation and dialogue" over the planned judicial changes, a statement from his office said.

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