

Israeli embassies around world shut as staff go on strike



Tel Aviv, October 31 (RHC)-- All Israeli embassies and consulates around the world have stopped operating amid a coordinated strike by diplomats and military attaches over low pay and upcoming tax plans that would severely affect their livelihoods.

Israel's diplomatic missions stopped operating early Wednesday over a long-simmering dispute with the regime's finance ministry over expense stipends paid to envoys.

The strike, coordinated by the Israeli foreign ministry, ministry of military affairs and the Histadrut Labor Federation, came as a response to the finance ministry's decision to walk back previous understandings and force the envoys to pay back thousands of dollars they had been reimbursed for expenses.

"Due to the decision of the Israeli ministry of finance to breach understandings that were agreed upon and signed by the director general of the ministry of finance on July 21, 2019, and to apply a one-sided procedure that alters a protocol that has been in place for several decades, we are forced to close the embassy," a statement posted on most embassy websites said.

"No consular services will be provided and no one will be allowed to enter the embassy/consulate," the statement added. The strike is expected to cause chaos for Israelis traveling abroad or in immediate need of consular assistance. More importantly, the disruptions will reportedly affect Israel's arms exports

and its military cooperation with other countries.

The expense stipends are meant to cover the costs inflicted on the envoys and military attaches stationed to carry out a range of works, including hosting events at an ambassador's residence to transport costs.

The Israeli treasury is trying to review the reimbursement system while slapping taxes on the stipends. The planned changes are expected to affect the diplomats and attaches, who are already angry about low salaries.

Worse still, the Israeli foreign ministry is pushing to apply the new scheme retroactively, which means the envoys will be forced to return thousands of dollars.

"Unfortunately, the decision of the ministry of finance does not leave us any choice but to take the above-mentioned action, since the vital interests of the State of Israel have been harmed," the statement said. "We hope that this crisis will be resolved as soon as possible."

Israeli diplomats have long made it clear that they are not happy with their salaries and working conditions. They have held similar strikes every few years and at times cost the regime dearly.

In January 2011, for example, the move forced Tel Aviv to call off a planned visit by then-Russian president Dmitry Medvedev. Three years later, the strikes and labor sanctions continued and at one point the envoys stopped all communications with foreign governments and halted providing consular services to Israelis abroad. They upped the ante by shutting down the ministry's headquarters in Jerusalem al-Quds and 103 embassies and consulates worldwide.

However, the foreign ministry's workers union has failed to gain much success.

In November 2014, Histadrut and the foreign ministry signed an agreement to increase pay. But five years later, diplomats say the agreement has yet to be fully implemented.

The foreign ministry's struggle with massive budget cuts has also added to the issue. In September, a "grave deficit" in the budget forced the ministry to announce that it was cutting most of its diplomatic activities.

It said the instruction was given by the finance ministry's accountant general due to the "grave deficit" in its budget.

The Tel Aviv regime has doubled the funding of all ministries over the past years while the foreign ministry's budget has been slashed dramatically, currently standing at around \$367 million annually.

Israel has 69 embassies, 23 consulates and five special missions abroad, including its United Nations mission.

In May, a report found that some Israeli ambassadors and their staff were living in bad conditions, and that many of staff residences owned by the foreign ministry were in a dilapidated state.

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