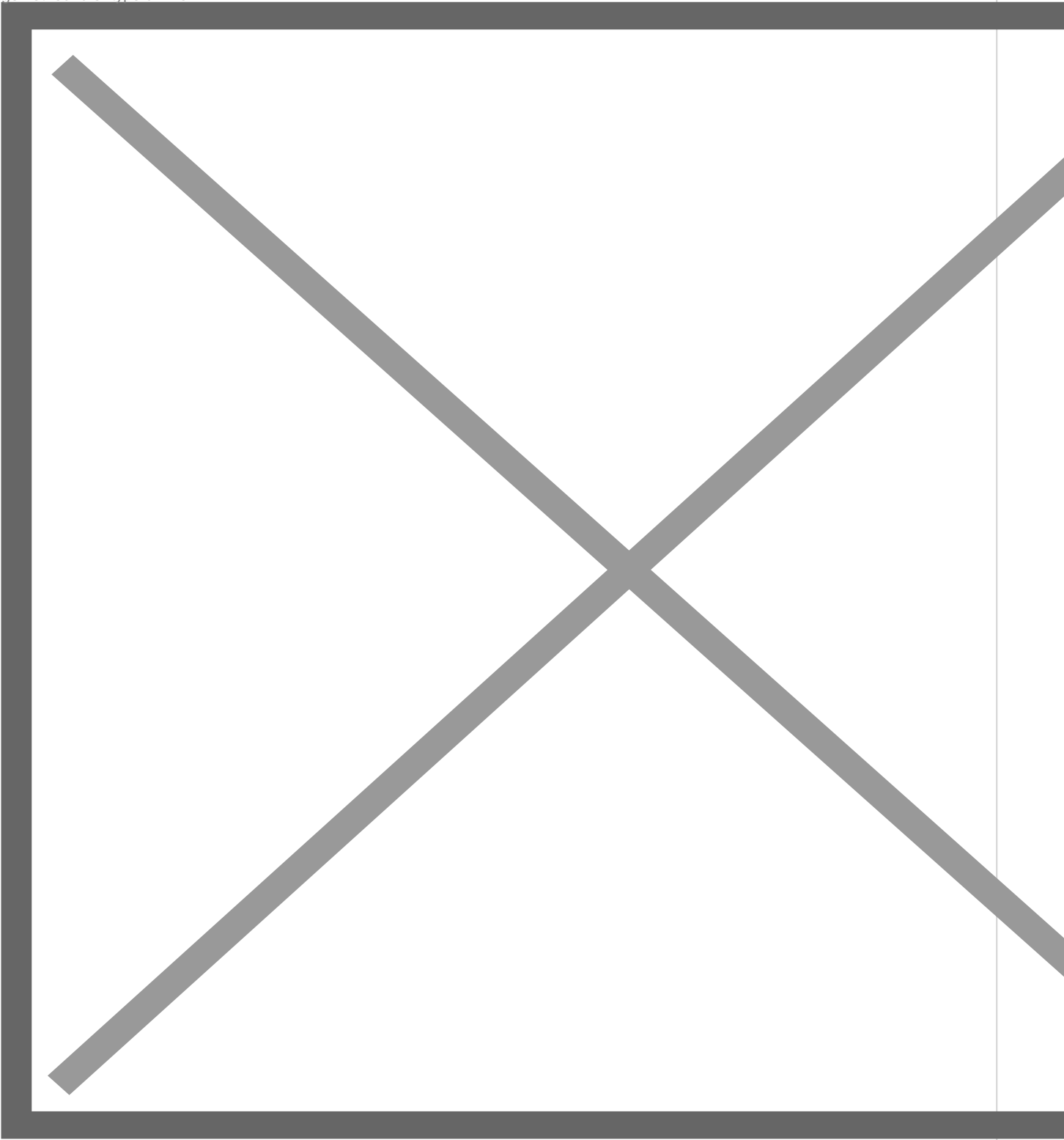


Netanyahu announces plans to arm Israelis after Jerusalem attack

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Tel Aviv, January 30 (RHC)-- Israel has announced plans to make it easier for Israelis to get firearms amid escalating violence in the occupied Palestinian territory. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

announced the measure late on Saturday after convening a meeting of his security cabinet — filled with hardline politicians — over a pair of shootings that included an attack in occupied East Jerusalem.

“We deploy forces, we increase forces, and we do it in different arenas,” Netanyahu said on Saturday. He promised to expedite gun permits for Israeli citizens and to step up efforts to collect “illegal weapons.”

The homes of the suspected assailants would also be sealed immediately ahead of demolition, he said, “in order to exact an additional price from those who support terrorism.” His office later said social security benefits for the families of attackers will also be cancelled.

In addition, it promised new steps to “strengthen” illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank but gave no details.

Al Jazeera Diplomatic Editor James Bays said Netanyahu’s plans to approve more gun permits for Israeli citizens come as Israeli police were also encouraging those with existing licenses to carry their guns. “While Netanyahu is urging Israelis not to take the law into their own hands, he’s also putting more weapons into those very same hands,” he said from occupied East Jerusalem. Bays went on to describe the measures against the Palestinian families as “collective punishment.”

Al Jazeera’s senior political analyst, Marwan Bishara, said arming civilians in Israel could further escalate violence. “They are trying to further arm already armed people in Jerusalem and the West Bank,” Bishara said, adding: “More violence and more suffering will only play to the hands of the most extreme of the extremes [groups] in Israel and potentially in Palestine.”

The weekend shootings took place towards the end of a month of growing confrontation and follow an Israeli raid in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin that killed nine Palestinians and exchanges of fire between Israel and Gaza. In all, Israeli forces have killed 32 Palestinians this month.

A spokesperson for the Israeli military said an additional battalion had been sent to the occupied West Bank for reinforcement. Analysts in Israel said Netanyahu was under pressure from hardliners in his cabinet, including National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. The government in Israel is the most right-wing in Israeli history. Ben-Gvir, who had pushed for more gun permits, said on Saturday that he would also push for the death penalty against “terrorists”.

He said the security cabinet’s new measures were “important,” but that he wanted a “lot more.” “Itamar Ben-Gvir has a reputation of being a fireman and now Netanyahu is giving him a full container of oil,” said Akiva Eldar, a contributor to the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz. “I am afraid that Netanyahu’s hands are tied. Between two evils, he has to decide which side he takes, and I am afraid that there is no responsible adult in his cabinet that can stop him,” Eldar told Al Jazeera.

The latest measures on Saturday were announced as tens of thousands of protesters also gathered in the city of Tel Aviv to protest separate plans by Netanyahu’s government, which took office in December, to overhaul the country’s judicial system and weaken the Israeli Supreme Court.

The marchers also held a moment of silence in memory of the Jerusalem shooting victims.

The increasing violence has meanwhile raised questions about a third Palestinian uprising. Basem Naim of Hamas, the group that rules the Gaza Strip, told Al Jazeera that they were ready to respond to further Israeli raids. He said the group was committed to defending its people and families, as well as Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

“We are not planning or initiating any escalation or any violence campaigns. We are also ready, at the same time, to respond [to attacks] as usual,” he said. Naim said Hamas would seek its people’s freedom with all available means, including diplomatic, political and armed means.

After a meeting headed by President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority called on the international community and the United States to force Israel to halt its raids in the West Bank.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to visit Jerusalem and Ramallah on Monday and Tuesday.

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