

Israeli health system on brink of collapse as doctors leave in droves

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Tel Aviv, August 6 (RHC)-- A surge in requests from Israeli doctors to leave the occupied territories at any cost has been reported since the Knesset (the parliament) passed a bill late last month that would overhaul the judiciary and limit its powers.

Naftali Kaminski, the Boehringer-Ingelheim Endowed Professor of Internal Medicine and Chief of Pulmonary, Critical Care and Sleep Medicine at Yale School of Medicine, said he has been receiving many messages from both young and senior Israeli physicians that say they will even work abroad for free since last week when the bill was approved.

"In order for them to build relationships and receive recommendations, it's common for foreign physicians in the United States to work for one or two years with no payment before they're accepted to residency. It's a path which Israelis usually don't go for," he said.

Israeli physicians and researchers working abroad also said they have been receiving requests from their colleagues in Israel who wish to leave the occupied territories, even willing to accept a worsening of employment conditions or a devaluation of their status and professional responsibilities.

"I've just spoken to another physicians, the third to call me in two days, who wanted to know if there's any a concrete offer or a position," said Erez Nosek, a senior physician in the Department of Neurosurgery at the NYU Medical Center and the director of the cerebral bypass surgery unit. "I've never received this type of inquiries, of someone looking for a position and an immediate transfer," Nosek said, adding that his colleagues in the US have also received such requests.

Israeli "physicians who're currently in residency in the United States are looking for ways to stay in the country instead of returning to Israel," he said.

The Israel Medical Association said nearly 500 doctors are expected to leave Israel due to the judicial plan, warning that the exodus can lead to a severe medical crisis. The association's heads also told health ministry CEO Moshe Bar Siman Tov and the heads of Israel's health system during an emergency meeting on Wednesday that even if "only" 300 doctors were to leave, the crisis would be unbearable.

Israeli doctors declared a strike and more army reservists have asked to halt service in a public backlash to the ratification of the first stage of a judicial overhaul that critics say endangers democracy. Also on Wednesday, the chairman of the so-called "National Council for Civilian Research and Development" warned of "irreversible" damage to research and development and academia in Israel due to the overhaul.

"There was always brain drain," Peretz Lavie told The Marker newspaper, with many Israelis teaching and conducting research at American universities, but "we are seeing a change," he added. "People are concerned about returning to Israel and joining Israeli academic institutions."

His remarks came a day after the research council sent a letter, together with the Council of University Heads, warning prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu that recent developments "may endanger the future" of the Israeli regime.

"We - scientists, academics, entrepreneurs and high-tech people, members of the National Council for Civil Research and Development and the presidents of Israel's public universities, wish to alert you to the accumulation of clear warning signs for the future of scientific research" in Israel, they wrote.

The letter cited "a significant decrease in the willingness of leading Israeli scientists who are abroad to accept academic positions in Israel," as well as "a growing fear of the departure of outstanding personnel in Israel's science and technology fields" and "explicit threats to cancel scientific collaborations between scientists in Israel and the scientists of the world."

Haaretz said damage to Israel's academic ecosystem could accelerate the economic problems sparked by the overhaul. After the major component of the controversial judicial overhaul plan was passed, Moody's Investors Service reported that "negative consequences" and a "significant risk" loom over Israel's economy.

The rating agency noted that the number of new Israeli startups that choose to register overseas has jumped to over 80 percent since the start of this year when Netanyahu introduced the plan.

Netanyahu introduced the plan in January, triggering months of unprecedented anti-regime protests, with critics describing the plan as a threat to the independence of the courts by the prime minister, who is on trial on graft charges.

Those in favor of the scheme allege that it introduces some balance in the power that is wielded by the different branches of the regime. Its opponents, on the other side of the ledger, say upon ratification, the plan would empower the ruling class to act in a more authoritarian fashion.

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