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Police drag away people who take part in a protest against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and call for the release of hostages held in the Gaza Strip by the Hamas militant group outside of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, in Jerusalem, Sunday, March 31, 2024. Tens of thousands of Israelis gathered outside the parliament building in Jerusalem on Sunday, calling on the government to reach a deal to free dozens of hostages held by Hamas and to hold early elections. (AP/Ohad Zwigenberg)

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Jerusalem — April 1, 2024

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Tens of thousands of Israelis thronged central Jerusalem on Sunday in the largest anti-government protest since the country went to war in October. Protesters urged the government to reach a cease-fire deal to free dozens of hostages held in Gaza by Hamas militants and to hold early elections.

Israeli society was broadly united immediately after Oct. 7, when Hamas killed some 1,200 people during a cross-border attack and took 250 others hostage. Nearly six months of conflict have renewed divisions over the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, though the country remains largely in favor of the war.

Netanyahu has vowed to destroy Hamas and bring all the hostages home, yet those goals have been elusive. While Hamas has suffered heavy losses, it remains intact.

Roughly half the hostages in Gaza were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November. But attempts by international mediators to bring home the remaining hostages have failed. Talks resumed on Sunday with no signs that a breakthrough was imminent.

Hostages' families believe time is running out, and they are getting more vocal about their displeasure with Netanyahu.

"We believe that no hostages will come back with this government because they're busy putting sticks in the wheels of negotiations for the hostages," said Boaz Atzili, whose cousin, Aviv Atzili and his wife, Liat, were kidnapped on Oct. 7. Liat was released but Aviv was killed, and his body is in Gaza. "Netanyahu is only working in

his private interests."

PROTESTERS HAVE MANY GRIEVANCES

Protesters blame Netanyahu for the failures of Oct. 7 and say the deep political divisions over his attempted judicial overhaul last year weakened Israel ahead of the attack. Some accuse him of damaging relations with the United States, Israel's most important ally.

Netanyahu is also facing a litany of corruption charges which are slowly making their way through the courts, and critics say his decisions appear to be focused on political survival over the national interest. Opinion polls show Netanyahu and his coalition trailing far behind their rivals if elections were held today.

Unless his governing coalition falls apart sooner, Netanyahu won't face elections until spring of 2026.

Many families of hostages had refrained from publicly denouncing Netanyahu to avoid antagonizing the leadership and making the hostages' plight a political issue. But as their anger grows, some now want to change course — and they played a major role in Sunday's anti-government protest.

The crowd on Sunday stretched for blocks around the Knesset, or parliament building, and organizers vowed to continue the demonstration for several days. They urged the government to hold new elections nearly two years ahead of schedule. Thousands also demonstrated Sunday in Tel Aviv, where there was a large protest the night before.

Netanyahu, in a nationally televised speech before undergoing hernia surgery later Sunday, said he understood families' pain. But he said calling new elections — in what he described as a moment before victory — would paralyze Israel for six to eight months and stall the hostage talks. For now, Netanyahu's governing coalition appears to remain firmly intact.

Some hostage families agree that now is not the time for elections.

"I don't think that changing the prime minister now is what will advance and help my son to come home," Sheli Shem Tov, whose son Omer was kidnapped from a music festival, told Israel's Channel 12. "To go to elections now will just push to the side the most burning issue, which is to return the hostages home."

In his Sunday address, Netanyahu also repeated his vow for a military ground offensive in Rafah, the southern Gaza city where more than half of territory's population of 2.3 million now shelters after fleeing fighting elsewhere. "There is no victory without going into Rafah," he said, adding that U.S. pressure would not deter him. Israel's military says Hamas battalions remain there.

In another reminder of Israel's divisions, a group of reservists and retired officers demonstrated in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood.

Ultra-Orthodox men for generations have received exemptions from military service, which is compulsory for most Jewish men and women. Resentment over that has deepened during the war. Netanyahu's government has been ordered to present a new plan for a more equitable draft law by Monday.

Netanyahu, who relies heavily on the support of ultra-Orthodox parties, last week asked for an extension.

The Bank of Israel said in its annual report on Sunday that there could be economic damage if large numbers of ultra-Orthodox men continue not to serve in Israel's military.

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ISRAELI AIRSTRIKE HITS TENT CAMP AT HOSPITAL

Also Sunday, an Israeli airstrike hit a tent camp in the courtyard of a crowded hospital in central Gaza, killing two Palestinians and wounding another 15, including journalists working nearby.

An Associated Press reporter filmed the strike and aftermath at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah, where thousands of people have sheltered. The Israeli military said it struck a command center of the Islamic Jihad militant group.

Tens of thousands of people have sought shelter in Gaza's hospitals, viewing them as relatively safe from airstrikes. Israel accuses Hamas and other militants of operating in and around medical facilities, which Gaza's health officials deny.

Israeli troops have been raiding Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest, for nearly two weeks and say they have killed scores of fighters, including senior Hamas operatives.

Gaza's Health Ministry said more than 100 patients remain with no potable water and septic wounds, while doctors use plastic bags for gloves.

Not far from Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, dozens of members of Gaza's tiny Palestinian Christian community gathered at the Holy Family Church to celebrate Easter, with incense wafting through the rare building that appeared untouched by war.

"We are here with sadness," attendee Winnie Tarazi said. About 600 people shelter in the compound.

GAZA'S DEATH TOLL NEARS 33,000 AND HUNGER GROWS

The United Nations and partners warn that famine could occur in devastated, largely isolated northern Gaza. Humanitarian officials say deliveries by sea and air are not enough and that Israel must allow far more aid by road. Egypt has said thousands of trucks are waiting.

Israel says it places no limits on deliveries of humanitarian aid. It has blamed the U.N. and other international agencies for the failure to distribute more aid.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Sunday that at least 32,782 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the war. The ministry's count does not differentiate between civilians and fighters, but it has said that women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed.

Israel says over one-third of the dead are militants, though it has not provided evidence, and it blames Hamas for civilian casualties because the group operates in residential areas.

Amid concerns about a wider conflict in the region, Lebanese state media reported that an Israeli drone struck a car in the southern Lebanese town of Konin.

A Lebanese security official told The Associated Press that Hezbollah militant Ismail al-Zain was killed, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. Israel's military called al-Zain a "significant commander." Hezbollah confirmed the death.

Late Sunday, a Palestinian attacker stabbed three people in southern Israel, seriously wounding them, said the Hatzalah rescue service. Police said the attacker was shot, but gave no further details on his condition.