



## Letter from Jerusalem

from Our Own Correspondent

**EYE  
WORLD**

**A**MONG the less obvious casualties of the coronavirus in Israel has been our justice system. The first session of "The State of Israel against Binyamin son of Benzion Netanyahu" was to open in the Jerusalem district court on 17 March. But at the 11th hour, ruling Likudnik stooge and justice minister Amir Ohana suddenly decided to limit all "non-essential" hearings because of the health situation, postponing the case until 24 May.

Netanyahu remains in office, despite facing one charge of bribery and three of fraud and breach of trust, and despite having failed in three consecutive elections over the past 12 months to win a majority to form a new government. His political strategy has dovetailed with his legal campaign. He has savagely attacked the opposition, which holds more seats than his own bloc, accusing them of being in cahoots with "terror-supporting" Arab-Israeli politicians, and successfully prevented their forming an alternative coalition to oust him.

Last Sunday Israeli president Reuven Rivlin first invited opposition leader and ex-army general Benny Gantz to try to form a new government, before later asking the two main leaders to try to agree a unity administration. But Netanyahu's preferred option has been to try to force a fourth election, after which, should he prevail, he will replace the attorney-general behind the indictments for receiving illegal gifts from businessmen and intervening in media regulation to benefit more accommodating press barons.

But Netanyahu isn't only interested in stopping the current trial. For now, the AG has

ruled the PM out as a suspect in a case of bribery involving the sale of German submarines to Israel's navy, in which a number of his closest aides, and even one of his many lawyers, have been implicated. But that may change.

Then there's the pending case of the suspicious timing of the sale of shares in his cousin's company (*Eye* 1493), which made Netanyahu \$3.7m, and the murky circumstances of how he paid for the shares in the first place. The AG has cited the ongoing election campaigns as reason not to order a full criminal investigation yet.

The latest election has dredged up a new potential case against Netanyahu as the police, acting on reports in the media, are considering a full-blown investigation into a shadowy computer hacker who has spent the past year collecting information on Gantz.

While Netanyahu's Likud party denies any connection to the hacker, payment for his services was allegedly arranged by another of Netanyahu's lawyers – the one usually handling the multiple lawsuits brought by former cleaners and other domestic employees against his grasping wife, as well as his wastrel son's libel cases. To make things worse, the hacker was based in the law offices of yet another Netanyahu lawyer, the one leading his defence in the current trial case.

This new Watergate-style case could spiral out of control into a further series of lengthy investigations in which not only Netanyahu, but also the men who represent him and his family in court, are all potential suspects. The ponderous AG, who was once Netanyahu's cabinet secretary and has now staked his career on convicting him, is loath to go down that road while his team of state prosecutors are focusing their energy on indictments they already have.

As long as Netanyahu remains in power, using every resource, including a health emergency, to fight them every step of the way, one case against the prime minister may be all they can handle for now.

## Postcard from Tokyo



**O**UR Teflon-coated PM Shinzo Abe was hoping this summer's Olympic Games would distract from Japan's long-term decline. Instead, coronavirus is threatening to stymie things entirely. The IOC is still smiling and waving, but as flight and hotel bookings nosedive, the prospect of athletes competing in half-empty stadia (or worse) is inescapable.

Assuming the Games go ahead, Abe should enjoy them while he can, for the economy looks set to tank back into recession. Even when it recovers, our shrinking and ever greayer population means economic growth is a thing of the past. Thus the bunting is still being strung up with manic glee, and masked volunteers are practising their iffy English for the hoped-for hordes of foreign tourists. So long as the visitors stay in shiny Tokyo, a beacon of prosperity in a hinterland of ropey infrastructure and abandoned villages, they may go home believing we've finally left the "lost decades" behind.

The PR goons make much of Tokyo 2020's green credentials, and our fawning press has done nothing to contradict them – despite the loss of public parks, the eviction of the homeless who live in them and the demolition of a 230-apartment complex for the elderly to make way for the huge new national stadium.

To reduce costs, only eight new venues have been built in Tokyo, while some existing venues have been renovated. The "sustainable" tag is a bit of a stretch. Several venues use timber from south-east Asian rainforests, destroying endangered orangutan habitat in Borneo; and tropical plywood from Malaysia and Indonesia has been used to build the Ariake volleyball arena. There are fears the national stadium may have been built with the same wood.

Construction of new venues was due to be signed off last November, but completion of the Aquatic Centre has been delayed since the company supplying earthquake shock absorbers was found to have fiddled the figures to make them look more absorbent than they are.

Builders, meanwhile, have been toiling round the clock to meet deadlines – some at the national stadium report grafting for 28 days in a row. Japan is renowned for the practice of *karoshi*, or death from overwork; and there were 21 such deaths in the building trade in 2017. In April that year, a 23-year-old managing ground works at the stadium took his own life. The site's security log showed he'd worked 190 hours of overtime in the previous month. Whistleblowers get short shrift. Representatives from the Doken General Labour Union say they were intimidated by security staff when they tried to speak to workers at the stadium.

A key problem is our labour shortage. It is particularly acute in the building trade, where there are four vacancies for every worker, one in four of whom is over 60. One might expect such a shortage to lead to rising wages and better conditions, but it seems we've grown used to working like dogs. We are one of the few advanced economies that does not require employers to give workers employment contracts and almost half of the workers on the Olympic sites don't have formal contracts.

Do our politicians and their real estate chums care? While the hard-nosed governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, has pushed for privatisation of state assets to help pay off the city's debts, she's rolled over for the city's property developers. Once the tourists have gone (if they come), the Olympic Village will become a vast condominium called Harumi Uss. The land has been valued at 161bn yen (US\$1.5bn), but the city has already agreed to sell it to 11 big developers for the bargain price of just 13bn yen (\$120m). *Ker-ching!*, as we say in these parts.

## BAHRAIN WATCH

**L**AST WEEK Hajer Mansoor was finally released from a three-year prison sentence in Bahrain. She had been jailed on trumped up charges as an "act of reprisal" for being the mother-in-law of Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, an advocate at the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, who now lives in exile in the United Kingdom. His brother-in-law and a cousin remain in prison.

None of this should be a surprise. In the years since the 2011 protests against the ruling al-Khalifa family's oppressive regime, authorities have increasingly crushed free speech through draconian anti-terrorist laws and a repressive penal code.

In 2017, Bahrain's only independent newspaper, *al-Wasat*, winner of multiple international awards for media credibility, was forcibly closed for "sowing division", aka telling the truth. Prior harassment against the paper included the arrest of one of its founders, Karim Fakhrawi, who died in police custody nine days later. The government said he died of kidney failure. If a beating is severe enough, Dr Grim notes, kidneys do fail, blocked by proteins released from shattered muscles.

Last year Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of the main political opposition group al-Wefaq, was sentenced to life in prison for criticising the authorities. There is now no political opposition. In 2018, Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, was jailed for five years for "spreading rumours during wartime" by reporting civilian deaths in Yemen, and for "offending national institutions" by documenting torture in Bahrain's law prison.

Torture seems to be routine in Bahraini prisons, especially during interrogation.



Detainees describe electric shocks, suspension, beating, falaka (the whipping of bare feet), sleep deprivation, forced standing, extreme cold, along with sexual violence and promises of rape of family members, including children.

The former president of the Centre for Human Rights, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, jailed for life in 2011, has repeatedly alleged punitive torture and gang rape, and suffered multiple skull fractures. But the UN's Special Rapporteur on Torture has been unable to visit. Bahrain has cancelled scheduled inspections and ignored repeated reminders of the need to inspect. In 2017, the UN published concerns regarding "numerous and consistent allegations of widespread torture", including "torture resulting, inter alia, in death".

There was one glimmer of hope. Al-Khawaja's activist daughter Zainab Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, jailed in 2014 for tearing up a photograph of King Hamad, was released in 2016 after the intervention of Philip Hammond. Alas, since the former foreign secretary's heroic intervention, the UK seems reluctant to call the oppressors out again.

Why the reluctance? Surely not because in 2018 the UK (in the person of Prince Andrew) opened a military base in Bahrain, the UK's first new permanent base in the Middle East since 1971; or because in the same year Bahrain awarded Lockheed Martin a \$1.1bn contract for F-16 fighter jets; or because our own dear Queen seems so very fond of the al-Khalifas. King Hamad has been her guest at the Royal Windsor Horse Show and in the royal box at Ascot – and in 2017 she gave him a horse from the Royal Stud at Sandringham.

'Dr Grim'