

Netanyahu announces delay in implementing egalitarian section at Western Wall



By JEREMY SHARON, HERB KEINON

03/27/2016 Netanyahu said that a number of difficulties became evident after the decision was made, “and we are working to find a solution.” Less than 60 days after the cabinet approved what was hailed as a historic decision to upgrade the egalitarian space at the Western Wall, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday appointed the head of his bureau to coordinate discussions to deal with what he described as “problems” with its implementation.

Those problems are specifically the haredi political parties United Torah Judaism and Shas, which have denounced the agreement for giving formal standing to the Reform and Masorti denominations in Israel.

Leaders for the two denominations in Israel expressed concern at the announcement, saying the agreement must be implemented in full and not changed from that which was agreed to during the more than two years of negotiations which led to the cabinet decision in January.

Netanyahu said on Sunday that his bureau chief David Sharan will present him with recommendations on how to move forward within 60 days, after consulting with the relevant parties.

The prime minister said that a number of difficulties became evident after the decision was made, "and we are working to find a solution."

"I would like to reiterate my commitment to resolve the issue of prayer arrangements at the Western Wall in the aforesaid direction," Netanyahu said in a statement to the press.

UTJ and Shas voted against the cabinet decision in January to create a large egalitarian section at the southern end of the Western Wall for non-Orthodox prayer, but did not threaten to topple the coalition because of it.

Because of pressure from several haredi rabbis, Chief Rabbi David Lau and the online haredi media since the agreement was approved, UTJ and Shas have been ever more vociferous in their opposition to the deal, and have threatened various measures against the coalition including not backing government legislation.

UTJ MKs have, however, ruled out quitting the government, saying that to do so would strengthen the non-Orthodox movements at their expense.

According to the timetable for implementation of the agreement, Religious Services Minister David Azoulay of Shas was supposed to authorize the required changes to the regulations for the Law of the Holy Places 30 days after the agreement was approved by the cabinet.

Azoulay has yet to do so, and has said he will do as instructed by Shas spiritual leader Rabbi Shalom Cohen.

The deadline for the presentation of the physical plans for the expanded egalitarian section is also likely to be missed.

Yizhar Hess, director of the Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel, said he was concerned that implementation deadlines had been missed, but that he trusted in the prime minister to fully implement the deal as was agreed in January.

"No one, in Israel or the Diaspora, is even contemplating that the government of Israel will retreat from this historic compromise agreement, an agreement which was reached after intense and exhaustive negotiations, and to which the prime minister committed in countless forums and gatherings," said Hess.

“If, God forbid, the agreement is not implemented, it would be a horrific scenario Jewishly and Zionistically. It would be a strategic mortal blow, unprecedented even, to the status of Israel as the state of the Jewish people.”

Gilad Kariv, director of the Reform Movement in Israel, spoke in similar terms of a possible crisis between Israel and world Jewry.

“We expect the agreement to be fully implemented in 60 days’ time,” said Kariv. If this does not happen, “the dispute over the Western Wall will become more severe, and the issue will pass to the High Court of Justice, exactly at a time when we need unity and not more divisiveness.”

Kariv said that the unity of the Jewish people “cannot be held captive by internal struggles within the haredi sector,” and called on the prime minister to speak out against “continued incitement from haredi politicians against millions of Reform Jews.”

