

Draft ruling could bring down Israeli government

Court: Ultra-Orthodox men must be called up for military service

BY GEORGE GAYNOR

ISRAEL'S Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the military must begin drafting ultra-Orthodox men for military service, in a decision that could lead to the collapse of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's governing coalition as it continues to wage war in Gaza.

The court ruled yesterday that, in the absence of a law that distinguishes between Jewish seminary students and other draftees, Israel's compulsory military service system applies to the ultra-Orthodox like any other citizens.

Under long-standing arrangements, ultra-Orthodox men have been exempt from the draft, which is compulsory for most Israeli men and women.

These exemptions have long been a source of anger among the secular public, a divide that has widened during the eight-month-old war.

The military has called up tens of thousands of soldiers and says

it needs all the troops it can get. More than 600 soldiers have been killed.

Politically powerful ultra-Orthodox parties, who are key partners in Netanyahu's governing coalition, fiercely oppose any change in the current system.

If the exemptions are ended, they could leave the coalition, causing the government to collapse and leading to new elections.

The court decision comes at a sensitive time, as the war in Gaza drags on into its ninth month and the number of dead soldiers continues to mount.

The court found that the state was carrying out "invalid selective enforcement, which represents a serious violation of the rule of law, and the principle according to which all individuals are equal before the law".

It did not say how many ultra-Orthodox men should be drafted.

They attend special seminars

which focus on religious studies, with little attention on secular topics such as maths, English or science.

Critics have said they are ill-prepared to serve in the military or enter the secular workforce.

The ruling now sets the stage for growing friction within the coalition between those who support drafting more ultra-Orthodox and those who oppose the idea.

Ultra-Orthodox politicians are likely to face intense pressure from religious leaders and their constituents and may have to choose whether remaining in the government is worthwhile for them.

"It can worsen tensions in the coalition," said Shuki Friedman, vice-president of the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank.

He said ultra-Orthodox people "understand that they don't have a better political alternative, but at same time their public is saying, 'Why did we vote for you?'"



Former France star Lilian Thuram with his honorary degree from the University of Strathclyde

World Cup winner honoured

WORLD Cup-winning footballer Lilian Thuram has received an honorary degree from the University of Strathclyde.

The former France star, who was part of the victorious 1998 squad, created the Lilian Thuram Foundation for Education Against Racism in 2005.

It organises workshops in school and universities in France and other countries, accompanied by lectures, debates and exhibitions.

The foundation supports a wide range of activities to fight discrimination and defend human rights.

Others honoured by the university included singer Lauren Mayberry of Glasgow band Chvrches.

She studied at Strathclyde, gaining a law degree and subsequently a masters in journalism before forming Chvrches with her fellow Strathclyde alumni Iain Cook and Martin Doherty.

Charity's call after rise in number of STIs

BY LUCY GARCIA

DIAGNOSES of the sexually transmitted infections chlamydia and gonorrhoea in Scotland are on the rise, prompting a charity to say there must be a "wake-up call" on investment in sexual health services.

The Terrence Higgins Trust said a new approach is needed to deal with growing cases of STIs. Statistics from Public Health Scotland (PHS) showed there were 13,400 chlamydia cases and 5999 gonorrhoea cases reported in Scotland in 2023.

There had been a 56% increase in gonorrhoea diagnoses since 2019. Most cases were among men, as has been the case over the 10-year period covered by PHS's report.

Public Health Scotland consultant in health protection Dr Kirsty Roy said: "It is good news that we are seeing testing levels in sexual health clinics return to pre-pandemic levels, which support early detection and treatment.

"Although attendances are increasing, the data suggests fewer young people and heterosexual men are using sexual health services.

This puts them at risk of having an undiagnosed STI if they have had

unprotected sex. The best way to reduce your risk of catching sexually transmitted infections is the correct and consistent use of a condom with new and casual partners."

Alan Eagleson, head of Scotland services at the Terrence Higgins Trust, said: "The continued rise of sexually transmitted infections is of significant concern and clearly demonstrates that our approach to sexual health in Scotland must adapt if we are to avert a crisis.

"This data shows that rates of gonorrhoea have once again hit historical highs. Diagnoses of chlamydia are also on the increase – it's continuing to disproportionately impact young women in Scotland.

"This must come as a wake-up call to the Scottish Government and prompt urgent investment into vital sexual health services across the country. Testing for STIs needs to be made easily accessible for anyone who needs it, starting with the delivery of the long-promised national STI online postal self-sampling service.

"Long-term planning and funding for our essential sexual health services – in both the NHS and the third sector – also needs to be prioritised."