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Jerusalem, February 8 (RHC)-- Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has appeared in court to formally respond to corruption charges against him, as his trial resumes weeks before legislative elections in the occupied territories.

He arrived at the Jerusalem al-Quds district court for a hearing on Monday morning under heavy security and after several delays due to the coronavirus lockdown. Dozens of protesters demanding his resignation gathered near the court house, following weekly demonstrations held in recent months.

Netanyahu, who is the first Israeli prime minister to be indicted while in office, will likely be required to verbally confirm the defense filed by his lawyers. In 2019, he was indicted on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust stemming from three long-running cases.

Case 1,000 involves allegations that Netanyahu received luxury gifts from international billionaires in exchange for favors. In Case 2,000, he is accused of conspiring with the owner of the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper to undermine a critical daily. And Case 4,000 involves allegations that Netanyahu offered incentives to the Israeli telecom provider Bezeq in return for positive stories in the Walla news website.

It is the second time that Netanyahu attends a hearing of his trial in person. The first hearing took place last May, where the premier alleged that the charges against him were “fabricated.” He repeated that claim on Sunday, calling on his supporters not to come to the court to show solidarity with him due to surging coronavirus infections.

“I know you want to give me strength in light of the fabricated and false cases against me,” Netanyahu said. “But we are at a time when a [mutated strain] is spreading around the world and in Israel too, so for the sake of your own health I ask you: Don’t come tomorrow.”

Israeli parliament (Knesset) speaker and Netanyahu loyalist Yariv Levin had insisted that the court must postpone the trial, claiming it was unfair for the prosecution to present its case during the election campaign. Proceeding now “will be lending a hand to blatant meddling in the elections,” he told Israel Hayom newspaper.

Israel will hold its fourth parliamentary elections in two years on March 23 amid public anger over Netanyahu’s graft charges and handling of the coronavirus crisis.

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