

《以色列外交官罢工致103个大使馆关闭》

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Israel's diplomats called an out-all strike over a long-running pay and conditions dispute on Sunday, shutting the country's 103 foreign embassies and jeopardising a forthcoming visit by the pope.

The foreign ministry employees union said it was ordering its 1,200 members to stop work indefinitely from 3pm (1pm GMT) after accusing the finance ministry of failing to take the diplomats' grievances seriously following nearly a year of haggling.

It is the Israeli diplomatic service's first total shutdown since Israel was established in 1948 and threatens to bring the country's diplomacy to a halt after it was already curtailed by more limited industrial action that took effect earlier this month.

Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli foreign minister, condemned the strike as irresponsible and "a wretched decision and a display of a loss of control on union 's part".

One immediate effect will be to prevent Mr Lieberman, noted more for his confrontational approach than his diplomatic tact, from going to work after the foreign ministry headquarters in Jerusalem - just a few hundreds from the Knesset, Israel's parliament - also shut its doors.

Yigal Palmor, the foreign ministry spokesman - departing from his customary role of defending his country's official positions on the global stage - accused the government of refusing to negotiate seriously.

"The treasury have shown us nothing but indifference and disdain and have left us with no strike but to go on indefinite strike," he said. "We have to at least get their attention. They seem only to give us the cold-shoulder and give the impression that they can't be bothered. As long as there is no negotiations, there will be no diplomatic service."

The diplomats are demanding an increase in monthly salaries, said to range between ?1,049 to ?1,570 a month, and compensation for their spouses loss of earnings for having to give up work when posted abroad.

An extended strike has the potential to cripple Israeli diplomacy since the foreign ministry is responsible for organising visits of incoming foreign dignitaries, as well as Israeli ministers' trips abroad.

It could force the Vatican to call off a two-day visit by Pope Francis to the Holy Land, scheduled for May 24 and 25. A Vatican advance team has already postponed a visit intended to finalise arrangements for the the pontiff's arrival.

Even the limited foreign ministry sanctions in place since March 5 forced Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, to cancel a "historic" visit to Latin America last week after diplomats refused to take the necessary measures.

