

Netanyahu calls general election after accusing ministers of plotting a coup

By Robert Tait in Jerusalem

BENJAMIN NETANYAHU plunged Israel into its second general election in two years last night after sacking two of his senior ministers amid bitter divisions in his coalition government.

The Israeli prime minister said he would seek to dissolve the Knesset, the national parliament, and hold a fresh poll as soon as possible after days of in-fighting ended with the dismissal of Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni, his cabinet's two leading centrists.

The exit of Mr Lapid, the finance minister and leader of the Yesh Atid party, from the government had been all but inevitable after a crisis meeting with Mr Netanyahu late on Monday had failed to resolve their differences.

After a day of fevered speculation, Mr Netanyahu instructed his cabinet secretary, Avichai Mandelblit, to issue dis-

missal notices to Mr Lapid and Ms Livni, the justice minister and a former foreign minister who has been the cabinet's leading advocate of a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

"In recent weeks, including the last 24 hours, Ministers Lapid and Livni harshly attacked the government I'm heading," Mr Netanyahu said. "I won't tolerate any more opposition within the government. I won't tolerate ministers attacking from within the government the government's policies and its leader."

Mr Lapid and Ms Livni, leader of the Hatnuah party, were critical of the prime minister's planned legislation to declare Israel as the "nation state of the Jewish people", a Bill that has split the political establishment amid charges that it elevates the country's Jewishness over its democracy and reduces Arabs to second class citizen status.

Mr Lapid rejected an ultimatum from

Mr Netanyahu that he support the Bill and abandon his own flagship legislation – a law to waive VAT for first-time housebuyers – as the price for staying in the government.

The pair were also at loggerheads over next year's budget, for which Mr Lapid had responsibility.

In a televised address, Mr Netanyahu accused the two ministers of plotting a "coup" against him and said his government "had been forced on me" because his right-wing Likud party failed to win enough seats at last year's general election.

"Unlike its predecessor, the current government, from the day of its inception, was a contrarian government," he said. "Frequent elections are not a good thing, but a government with no governability that includes ministers who are working against it from the inside, is much worse." The deposed finance min-

ister, a popular former television host who emerged as the surprise star of Israel's last election in January 2013, when his party won 19 seats, called his sacking "an act of cowardice and a loss of control".

"Prime Minister Netanyahu has failed in his management of the country and in dealing with the needs of the Israeli public," his Yesh Atid party said in statement.

The party has pursued a secular agenda – calling for ultra-Orthodox Jews, who are exempt from military service, to carry an "equal sharing of the burden" while championing the cause of Israel's hard-pressed middle classes. But they have sat uneasily in a coalition dominated by Right-wingers and parties championing West Bank settlers.

Insiders had spoken of an attitude of "mutual loathing" between the two men, with Mr Netanyahu suspecting Mr Lapid

of coveting the prime minister's post and plotting to unseat him. Mr Lapid's departure frees Mr Netanyahu to woo his more natural allies in two ultra-Orthodox parties.

The new election is likely to take place by March, Israeli analysts predicted.

It will be held against a backdrop of a frozen peace process and increasing alienation between Israel's Jewish majority and its 20 per cent Arab population following months of unrest in the mainly Arab neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem.

"The elections are not over zero VAT, but about whether there will be a Zionist or extremist country here," Ms Livni said hours before her sacking.

Separately, the French parliament yesterday became the latest European legislature – following Britain and Spain – to vote in favour of recognising a Palestinian state in a highly symbolic but non-binding vote.

World Bulletin

MPs condemn China over Hong Kong ban

China's blocking of a British parliamentary fact-finding mission to Hong Kong shows the country's weakness, will harm its financial interests, and is not fitting behaviour for a G20 nation, MPs said yesterday. Beijing's decision to block MPs from the foreign affairs select committee from entering the former colony, the scene of mass pro-democracy protests, was met with derision in the Commons.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the former foreign secretary who presided over the final two years of Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997, said Beijing was acting in defiance of the agreement it reached with Britain. Sir Richard Ottaway, the committee chairman, told China: "If you want to be a member of the G20 you have to behave like a member of the G20."

'Merkozy' partnership is back in action

Nicolas Sarkozy, the former French president, will team up with Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, at the Christian Democratic Union conference in Cologne next Tuesday. Mr Sarkozy will attend the event following his victory in a leadership election for the CDU's sister party in France, the centre-right UMP, last weekend, a party spokesman confirmed to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

The close relationship between the two led to their partnership being branded "Merkozy", and it is expected to play a key role in the Frenchman's re-election bid in 2017. François Hollande, the current French president, has often been at loggerheads with Mrs Merkel.

Australian sex change teenager is 'born again'

The parents of a 19-year-old Australian who had a sex change operation to become a man have reportedly placed an amended notice in a newspaper announcing his birth. The couple, from Brisbane, wrote: "In 1995 we announced the arrival of our sprogget, Elizabeth Anne, as a daughter. He informs us that we were mistaken. Oops! We would now like to present our wonderful son - Kai Bogert. Loving you is the easiest thing in the world. Tidy your room."

The notice has received wide praise. Its authenticity has yet to be verified.

20 held over Pacific 'sorcery' murders

At least 20 people have been arrested over the torture and hanging of two men accused of sorcery in a village in Vanuatu. Authorities believe the executions on a remote Vanuatu island last month were witnessed by about 40 people.

The case is believed to be the first of its kind in Vanuatu and follows similar incidents in Papua New Guinea in which mobs have tortured and killed people – mainly women – accused of sorcery.

US is stoking a new Cold War, says Gorbachev

By Tom Parfitt in Moscow and Roland Oliphant in Kiev

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV has claimed that American "triumphalism" is stoking a new Cold War.

The former Soviet leader spoke out as Ukrainian forces and separatists agreed to a partial ceasefire in the civil war in the east of the country, in which at least 4,300 people have been killed since a Moscow-backed uprising broke out in April.

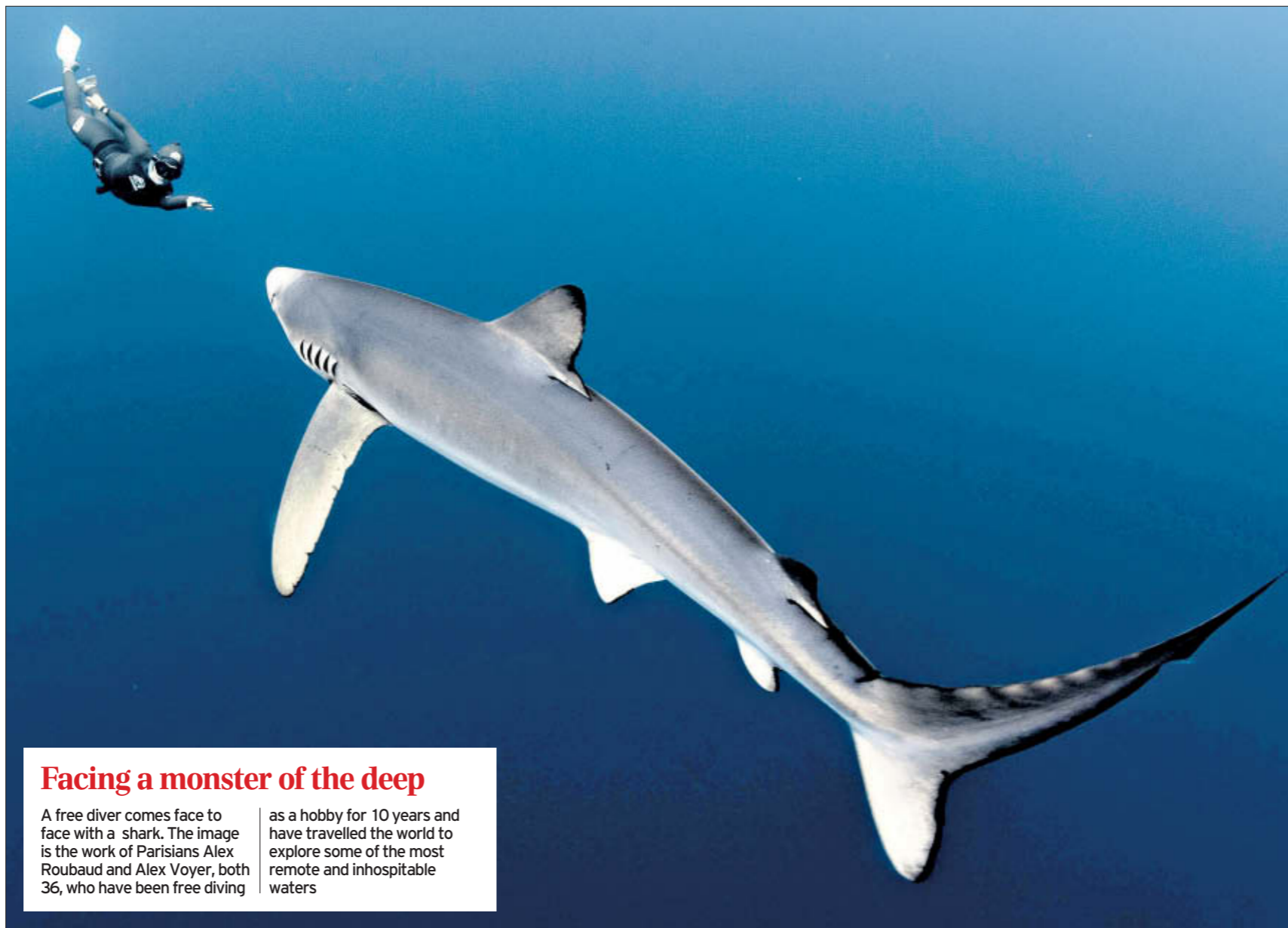
Mr Gorbachev said there was still time to defuse the standoff between Moscow and the West. "Now there are once again signs of a Cold War," he said in an interview with Tass, the state-owned news agency. "This process can and must be stopped. After all, we did it in the Eighties. We opted for de-escalation, for the reunification [of Germany]. And back then it was a lot tougher than now."

Mr Gorbachev, 83, added: "Today the danger comes from the American position. They are tortured by triumphalism."

"It's a good thing that the president [Vladimir Putin] has taken care of security, strengthened our defence potential, developed weaponry and upgraded the army. Now we are armed, so if necessary we can respond in kind. But I think that is not our task now."

It was "not too late" to ratchet down the confrontation. The right people would "be found" in Europe to build a new world order and halt "avid militarists".

In one positive sign, representatives of Ukraine and the Luhansk People's Republic, one of two breakaway statelets proclaimed by rebels in eastern Ukraine, said they had agreed "in principle" to a cessation of hostilities from Friday.



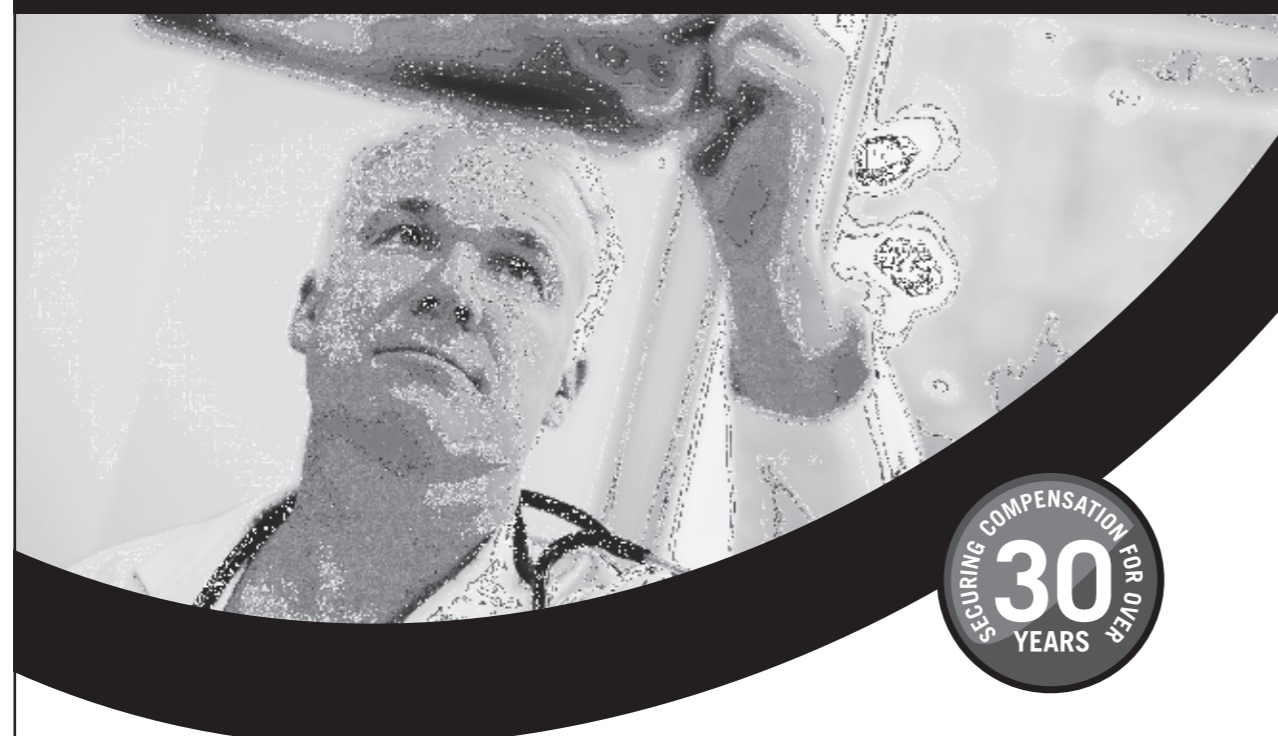
Facing a monster of the deep

A free diver comes face to face with a shark. The image is the work of Parisians Alex Roubaud and Alex Voyer, both 36, who have been free diving

as a hobby for 10 years and have travelled the world to explore some of the most remote and inhospitable waters

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