

Siniora visits Egyptian and Saudi leaders, tones down anti-Syrian rhetoric

Contributed by Administrator
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BEIRUT: A Saudi-Egyptian initiative to resolve the power struggle in Lebanon appeared to have gained new momentum over the weekend after Prime Minister Fouad Siniora visited both countries and adopted a more conciliatory tone toward Syria, which he has repeatedly accused of meddling.

"We are part of the Arab world ... and we seek the best brotherly relationship with Syria," Siniora told reporters after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo on Saturday night.

"Syria is our closest neighbor," he said, adding that there needs to be "mutual" respect for the sovereignty and independence of each state.

Siniora traveled to the Saudi Red Sea port city of Jeddah from Cairo following a European tour last week which took him to France, Spain and Italy.

In Jeddah, he held talks with Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz before returning to Lebanon on Sunday.

Their discussions covered Lebanon's political crisis, as well as the army's battle with Fatah al-Islam militants at the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in the North, Siniora told reporters at the Grand Serail on Sunday.

"I informed the king that what Lebanon is now struggling with is not a battle between the Lebanese and Palestinians," he said. "It is a war between the Lebanese and the Palestinians on one side, and terrorism on the other."

Saudi Arabia is a major backer of Siniora's government, and has been closely involved with France in efforts to break the deadlock in Beirut caused by the walkout of six opposition ministers last November.

There are also reports that French Foreign Ministry envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran will return to Lebanon next week to reissue an invitation for key government and opposition figures to attend talks hosted in Paris. The initial, mostly positive, response to his earlier call was diluted by tensions in the wake of MP Walid Eido's assassination on June 13.

Mediation efforts to break the deadlock, including the last round of meeting by Arab League chief Amr Moussa, have thus far failed.

While the impasse persists between the two camps, conciliatory efforts appear to be on the move within the ruling March 14 camp. The head of the Lebanese Forces (LF), Samir Geagea, visited the Chouf area on Saturday and met with Druze sheikhs and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader MP Walid Jumblatt.

The visit was touted as a final step to seal off the past and start a new page in Lebanon's history. LF and PSP militiamen fought a series of bloody battles during the Civil War, one result of which was to displace thousands of Christian civilians from the Chouf.

"There is a greater chance of success for homegrown initiatives," Geagea told reporters while he was making his rounds on Saturday. He said he kissed the hand of Druze Sheikh Abu Mohammad Jawad Wali al-Deen, out of "personal and spiritual" respect.

"While there are closed doors ... everything has a solution," said Geagea.

At the same time, Hizbullah's commander in the South, Sheikh Nabil Qaouk, reiterated that the only solution to the power struggle is the formation of a government of national unity, a refrain repeatedly put forward by the opposition as the only way out of the crisis.

"The ruling majority needs to announce its commitment to forming a government of national unity and allowing the opposition true participation in the governance of the country," he said in a statement on Sunday. - With additional reporting by Nafez Qawas

By Rym Ghazal, Daily Star staff, Monday, July 02, 2007