

INTERVIEW-Calming Lebanon needs regional accord - Jumblatt

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BEIRUT, July 4 (Reuters) - Only agreement among outside powers can resolve a paralysing political struggle between Lebanon's Western-backed government and Hezbollah, allied to Syria and Iran, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt said on Wednesday.

"We have to wait for regional circumstances to be favourable for an independent Lebanon," Jumblatt, a prominent supporter of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government.

Asked about prospects for a conference of rival Lebanese politicians in Paris next week, he said:

"If the French, with their contacts with the Iranians, can fix up a Lebanese dialogue in Paris, and somewhere behind the scenes the regional actors agree to stabilise Lebanon, why not?"

France hopes the meeting will promote renewed dialogue between the bitterly divided Lebanese camps and pave the way for agreement on a new president, due to be elected later this year.

But the 57-year-old politician gave no hint of optimism during an interview at his home in Beirut, accusing Syria, Iran and their Shi'ite Hezbollah allies of fomenting chaos in Lebanon after failing to topple Siniora's cabinet by other means.

The United States, locked in a regional struggle against Syria and Iran, strongly supports the Beirut government.

Hezbollah and its Shi'ite and Christian allies in the opposition say Siniora's government is illegitimate and has become a tool of U.S. and Israeli policy in Lebanon.

SYRIAN ROLE?

Jumblatt blamed Syria for a Sunni Islamist militant revolt in a Palestinian refugee camp in north Lebanon that the Lebanese army has been struggling to crush for more than six weeks.

Damascus was manipulating jihadi groups such as Fatah al-Islam, which broke off from a pro-Syrian Palestinian faction and made its base in the Nahr al-Bared camp last year, he added.

"Syria will do anything to destabilise Lebanon to tell the international community: 'look, the Lebanese are unable to rule themselves and we were the only ones able to secure Lebanon'."

Syria, forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in April 2005 amid an outcry over the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, denies supporting Fatah al-Islam.

Jumblatt also accused Syria and Iran of having a hand in a June 24 car bombing that killed six U.N. peacekeepers in the south, the first such attack on the beefed-up UNIFIL force that deployed after last year's war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah condemned the attack, which occurred in an area previously controlled by its guerrillas.

A former ally of Syria and now its fiercest critic, Jumblatt portrayed Lebanon as a fragile, multi-confessional democracy "full of life, free enterprise and a free press" that was under challenge from Hezbollah and its regional backers, whose agenda, he said, disregarded Lebanese state sovereignty.

Almost one year after Hezbollah's capture of two Israeli soldiers on July 12 plunged Lebanon into war, Jumblatt accused the Shi'ite group's leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, of seeking to weaken UNIFIL's presence in the south because he wanted to use the area for more "adventures against Israel".

But Jumblatt, who led a Druze militia in Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war, dismissed fears that the conflict could reignite.

Hezbollah was the only group allowed to keep its weapons after the war, but has sworn to use them only against Israel.

Jumblatt said Iran did not want Hezbollah to be embroiled in Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian violence in Lebanon that would damage Nasrallah's standing as an anti-Israel hero in the Muslim world.

"The Iranians don't give a damn about Lebanon, but they remain concerned about the image of Nasrallah," he added.

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