

INTERVIEW-Geagea sees more killings, deadlock in Lebanon

Contributed by Tom Perry, Reuters
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MAARAB, Lebanon, April 8 (Reuters) - Lebanese leader Samir Geagea said on Tuesday he expected Syria to try to kill more leaders of his anti-Damascus governing coalition, blaming it for previous assassinations.

Geagea, one of Lebanon's main Christian leaders, also said he saw no end in sight to a political conflict between the U.S.-backed governing alliance and opposition factions led by Hezbollah, a group backed by Syria and Iran.

"I expect new assassinations if those undertaking them get the chance," Geagea told Reuters in an interview. "Naturally, these assassinations will target the official and non-official leadership of March 14," he said, referring to the governing alliance whose members have been targeted in a series of attacks over the past three years.

Eight anti-Syrian politicians have been assassinated, starting with the Feb. 14, 2005 truck bombing that killed former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

"In my view ... the Syrian intelligence stands behind these assassinations, or attempted assassinations," said Geagea, consistently one of the toughest opponents of Syrian involvement in Lebanon. Syria has denied involvement in the killings.

Damascus dominated Lebanon from the end of the 1975-90 civil war until 2005 when the Hariri killing triggered international pressure that forced Syria to withdraw troops from the country.

Geagea spent most of the post-civil war period in jail -- the only wartime leader not to benefit from an amnesty.

He was sentenced to four life terms in 1994 for political murders. He always claimed his innocence and said he was a political prisoner. Leader of the Lebanese Forces group, Geagea was freed in 2005 after the Syrian withdrawal.

The March 14 alliance accuses Syria of trying to reassert itself in Lebanon through its allies in Beirut, led by the powerful political and military group Hezbollah.

STATUS QUO

The opposition has been locked in a power struggle with the governing coalition since November 2006. The conflict has paralysed much of the work of government and left Lebanon without a president for four months.

Geagea was sceptical of a new call for dialogue by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal Movement and a close ally of Syria.

He said the initiative seemed designed merely to ease pressure on Syria, which is accused by Arab states including Saudi Arabia of thwarting efforts to resolve the crisis.

"That's why we are very hesitant in giving a response to the dialogue before we know what's on the agenda and where it will lead," Geagea said. A recent Arab mediation effort failed to make progress, leaving the conflict in a state of stalemate.

"Regarding the current balances of power locally, regionally, internationally ... I think the situation will stay as it is," Geagea said.

"For the foreseeable future, weeks or perhaps the coming few months, the status quo will remain," he said. "It's not in anyone's interest for there to be any escalation." The crisis, Lebanon's worst since the civil war, has triggered bouts of violence between supporters of rival leaders.

But Geagea dismissed the chance of a more widespread conflict. "I am not afraid of civil war or internal war in the foreseeable future," he said. Neither March 14 or opposition groups Hezbollah and Amal wanted such a conflict, he added.

"I don't think they have the intention or that there is any political decision to go towards internal fighting." (Editing by Catherine Evans)

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