

Doha Dialogue Talks - Day 3 - May 19, 2008 - Hezbollah Arms Main Issue

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Opposition Committed to Government Seat Ratio, Electoral Law Prior to Presidential Elections

The opposition said on Monday that it is committed to the distribution of power within the government and to the elections law prior to the presidential vote.

A statement at the end of a meeting in Doha said the opposition renewed its commitment to the inter-Lebanese dialogue and to the Arab League initiative.

A meeting is underway between pro-government leaders in Doha to come up with a stance regarding the opposition's statement.

The Qatari initiative came on Sunday on the second day of talks aimed at resolving a protracted political impasse which erupted into days of deadly sectarian fighting between Lebanon's feuding factions.

"(Monday will) most likely be a decisive day in terms of success or failure," a delegate at the talks told AFP.

Qatar has suggested that the pro- and anti-government leaders meeting in Doha postpone a decision over the controversial electoral law and move directly to the election of army commander Gen. Michel Suleiman as president.

It also proposed the formation of a unity government of 30 ministers, with 13 from the parliamentary majority, 10 from the opposition and seven to be chosen by the elected president.

The opposition has insisted on holding more than a third of cabinet posts.

But a Christian member of the opposition delegation said on Monday they were not willing to postpone debate on the election legislation, which could prove decisive in determining results of a future parliamentary vote.

"We came here with an agenda aiming to reach an agreement over a national unity government, the electoral law, and electing a president," the delegate from the Free Patriotic Movement led by Michel Aoun told AFP.

The factions differ on constituency boundaries, fearing they would lose parliamentary seats from any demographic changes in the election law.

Qatar has also proposed including a clause in the final statement of the Doha talks providing security guarantees against the use of arms in internal Lebanese disputes.

Disagreement over the issue of weapons held by the Iranian- and Syrian-backed Hizbullah had threatened to derail the talks when members of the parliamentary majority bloc insisted on debating the issue in Doha.

Qatar sought to defuse the clash by offering to come up with a proposal on the arms question.

But the head of the Hizbullah team, MP Mohammed Raad, said on Sunday: "The issue of the resistance, its arms and capabilities is not up for discussion in Doha."

Pro-government delegates hit back.

"If the arms issue is not specifically addressed... then there will be nothing," Youth and Sports Minister Ahmad Fatfat said.

Druze MP Akram Shehayeb said the pro-government bloc wanted to tackle merely the weapons used "against the Lebanese people in Beirut and the mountains" in the clashes that killed 65 people earlier this month.

"The weaponry of the resistance is a Lebanese issue which would be debated in a (subsequent) dialogue led by the president in Lebanon," he said, using a term that refers to Hizbullah's fight against Israel.

Hizbullah was the only group that did not have to surrender its guns following the 1989 Saudi-brokered Taef agreement to end the 1975-1990 civil war, because it was fighting the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon.

Israel pulled its troops out of Lebanon in 2000.

The rival factions agree on electing Suleiman as president to succeed Damascus protégé Emile Lahoud, whose term ended in November.

But their differences over the government's makeup and the electoral law have blocked his election, exacerbating a crisis that began in November 2006 when six pro-Syrian ministers quit the cabinet of Prime Minister Fouad Saniora. (Naharnet-AFP)

Beirut, 19 May 08, 14:16

<http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&561AAF50FF1FC3E4C225744E003D7F10>
Live Coverage - Day 3 - May 19, 2008

Lebanese Dialogue in Doha Enters Day Four

9:35 The Emir of Qatar presided over a meeting grouping representatives of the majority and opposition in an effort to salvage the Doha Dialogue.

9:05 A press conference that the Arab committee was to hold this evening has been cancelled.

6:00 OTV said a new meeting by the elections law committee has been held to discuss new proposals.

5:39 Geagea said they can't take by weapons what they haven't taken by politics.

5:38 Geagea said hope in a settlement is fading away, stressing that the majority always is ready for balanced dialogue.

5:10 Premier Saniora said the opposition statement was not expected and could hamper efforts to work out an honorable settlement.

5:05 Mp Saad Hariri told Arabia Television that the Lebanese leaders would not return to Beirut unless a settlement is achieved.

5:00 The Arab Committee is deliberating a stand following the separate meetings by the opposition and majority leaders in Doha.

3:40 Future Television reported that the majority rejected the opposition's proposal and insisted on commitment to the Arab Initiative.

2:40 FPM leader Michel Aoun said the opposition has agreed on a settlement and awaits the majority's response.

2:20pm OTV: Cabinet minister al-Safadi asked Bin Jassem's permission to leave the talks, but the Qatari prime minister talked him into staying.

1:50pm A meeting is underway between pro-government leaders in Doha to come up with a stance regarding the opposition's statement.

1:10pm The opposition renewed in a statement its commitment to the inter-Lebanese dialogue in Doha and to the Arab League initiative.

12:30pm OTV: The opposition meeting, including Aoun, is still underway in Doha.

12:20pm Moussa said he will leave Doha Tuesday no matter what the results of the inter-Lebanese talks were because of other commitments.

12:10pm Future TV: Aoun pulled out of the opposition meeting when the conferees began tackling the Qatari proposal.

12:00pm NBN TV: Arab League chief Amr Moussa confirmed that the Lebanon crisis is half-way to a breakthrough.

11:33am Lebanese leaders from the pro- and anti-government camps were holding separate meetings in order to come up with an official response to the Qatari proposal.

11:30am Al-Manar TV: The opposition will make an official statement regarding the Qatari proposal based on guarantees given by the majority camp on the issue of the government make up.

10:15am MP Hasan Yaqoub to LBC: Doha talks are focused on the controversial elections law and the problem is how to divide Beirut.

9:35am National News Agency (NNA): An agreement of intent to elect Gen. Suleiman as president and form a national unity government is expected to be signed in Doha today.

9:30am Voice of Lebanon (VDL): Aoun confirmed he is staying in Qatar and will not pull out of the talks.

8:15am Al-Liwa: MP Saad Hariri threatened to pull out of the Doha talks unless an "honorable agreement" is reached.

8:00am Al-Hayat: Qatar's emir telephoned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian officials seeking their help in order to make the Doha dialogue a success.

7:00am An-Nahar: Aoun threatened to leave Doha and return to Beirut because the tide has turned in favor of the majority camp.

6:50am An-Nahar daily: Qatar's proposal calls for: - electing Gen. Suleiman president this week since he is a consensus candidate - postponement of the electoral law until after presidential elections - formation of a national unity government.

6:47am al-Hayat daily: March 14 coalition informed Qatar that it had approved to the proposal made by the Qatari emir. Berri tentatively agreed and said he would consult with Hizbullah, while FPM leader Michel Aoun rejected the Qatari offer.

6:45am LBC TV: Reports that the ruling majority agreed to proposals made by the Qatari emir, except for the part that

deals with security and Hizbullah arms which are expected to be subsequently tackled.

6:40am Al-Anwar daily: Positive statements were made overnight by both pro- and anti-government leaders in Doha.

6:35am As-Safir daily: A meeting was held early Monday between Qatar's FM, Speaker Nabih Berri, Arab League officials Amr Moussa, Hisham Youssef and Talah al-Amin, as well as opposition representatives MPs Mohammed Raad, Ali Hasan Khalil and Gebran Bassil

6:30am AL-Liwaa daily: A meeting took place at dawn between Qatar's Foreign Minister, PM Fouad Saniora and MP Saad Hariri at Sheraton-Doha.