

Lebanon Set For National Dialogue Amid New Security Concerns

Contributed by AFP
Sunday, 14 September 2008

BEIRUT (AFP)--Lebanon's rival political leaders will meet Tuesday for talks set to focus on the divisive issue of Hezbollah's weapons as Lebanon grapples with new security concerns after another deadly bombing.

President Michel Sleiman invited the 14 signatories of the May Doha Accord to take part in Tuesday's session, thwarting the Iran- and Syria-backed opposition's efforts to expand the dialogue to include more participants.

The Doha pact ended an 18-month-long political crisis, led to Sleiman's election after a six-month presidential vacuum and the formation of a national unity cabinet. It also called for a national dialogue under Sleiman's auspices.

"The 'national defense strategy' will be the title of the dialogue," said Prime Minister Fuad Siniora in comments published at the weekend, adding that participants "will decide what they want, and in light of what is discussed the dialogue agenda will be set."

The dialogue seeks mainly to define the relationship between the state and armed groups such as Hezbollah.

As the independent daily al-Anwar put it on Sunday: "Everyone knows that the national defense strategy is a pseudonym for the wishes of various local and foreign parties that Hezbollah be disarmed, and the opposing view of other local and foreign parties that it retain its arsenal."

Controversy over the Shiite militant group's weaponry intensified after its fighters captured two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid in July 2006 that sparked a deadly 34-day war that devastated Lebanon.

It boiled over again in May when Hezbollah staged an armed takeover of large swathes of predominantly Sunni west Beirut. More than 65 people were killed in the sectarian fighting - the worst since the 1975-1990 civil war.

The Western-backed ruling bloc in parliament maintains that the state should have the sole authority in taking decisions on war and peace.

But Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem put it differently at the weekend.

"There is no equation called the resistance and the state... There is one equation called the state that embraces the resistance," he said.

He set three conditions for the dialogue: all participants must agree that Israel is the single enemy and must be committed to building "a strong, just, balanced, capable state."

Qassem's third condition was that everyone agree that the goal is "providing the necessary means to liberate the land and secure defense through the national defense strategy."

The talks come amid increased security concerns following the assassination of a leading Druze politician.

Saleh Aridi, a senior member of the pro-Syrian Lebanese Democratic Party, was assassinated in a car bombing late on Wednesday in his hometown of Baysur, southeast of Beirut.

"Daily security is really the main agenda issue that should take over the dialogue," said Oussama Safa who heads the Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies.

"The national defense strategy is a long-term issue. It would be a mistake to focus ... exclusively on it," Safa told AFP.

"We need to talk about... the fact that people are living in fear."

Such concerns were highlighted in a headline in the liberal daily An-Nahar on Saturday - "Security before dialogue."

Tuesday's talks follow on from a 2006 initiative in which the same 14 major Muslim and Christian, pro- and anti-Syrian leaders held several round-table meetings in a bid to forge political unity.

Their efforts were interrupted by the Israel-Hezbollah war.

The 2006 talks were also the first such meetings without Syrian supervision since the civil war.

Damascus maintained an almost three-decades-long military presence in Lebanon, only withdrawing in 2005 after the assassination of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri.

Syria still wields much influence in its tiny neighbor through its political allies.

Aridi's murder was the first of a pro-Syrian politician in the wave of assassinations of public figures that followed Hariri's death in 2005.