

Hezbollah arms top agenda at Lebanon talks

Contributed by 7days.ae
Wednesday, 17 September 2008

Lebanon's rival factions launched national reconciliation talks yesterday to resolve lingering disputes after a crisis that brought the nation to the brink of civil war, with the thorny issue of Hezbollah's weapons topping the agenda. The talks brought together 14 political figures from the country's pro- and anti-Syrian camps who agreed to try to mend fences following a Qatari-brokered deal in May that put an end to a damaging 18-month political crisis. "Agreeing to dialogue in and of itself means that all subjects are open to discussion," said President Michel Sleiman, who chaired the talks. "The only thing banned here is failure or a reaching a dead-end." A statement from Sleiman's office released after a three-hour meeting said the next session will be held on November 5, adding that the president would mediate bilateral talks in the meantime to "consolidate the reconciliation." The main focus of the dialogue is on forging a defence strategy for Lebanon but there is widespread scepticism that an agreement can be reached given deep-seated divisions over Hezbollah's arsenal. The participants agreed to "launch talks on a national defence strategy... to reach a shared vision on this strategy," the statement said. Hezbollah, considered a terrorist group by the United States, has refused to disarm arguing that its weapons and guerrilla army are essential to defend the country against neighbouring Israel. However members of the Western-backed majority in parliament argue that Hezbollah's weapons undermine the authority of the state which should be the sole decision-maker on matters of defence.

<http://www.7days.ae/showstory.php?id=79022>