

Lebanon, US set up joint military commission

Contributed by ZEINA KARAM, AP, Washington Times
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BEIRUT, LEBANON (AP) - The United States and Lebanon on Monday set up a joint military commission to bolster military cooperation _ a move that follows the first visit by the newly elected Lebanese president to Washington.

The development comes against the backdrop of a Syrian troop buildup along Lebanon's northern border and follows bombings blamed on Islamic militants in the two neighboring Mideast countries.

The United States is a backer of Lebanon's army and has pledged more help since President Michel Suleiman's September meeting with President Bush. At the time, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates was quoted as saying the Lebanese army was given nearly \$400 million in military assistance. A further \$60 million worth of aid, including helicopters, ammunition and Humvees, is awaiting Congress' approval.

A joint statement Monday by the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the Lebanese army said the commission will provide an annual opportunity to discuss military cooperation. It also said the two sides signed three new military contracts worth \$63 million in U.S. grants to the Lebanese army for secure communications, ammunition and infantry weapons.

Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr and U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Mary Beth Long led the commission's inaugural session Monday. Long arrived in Beirut Sunday, joining U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Near East Affairs David Hale who has held separate talks with Lebanese politicians for several days.

The United States increased its military aid to Lebanon since the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel in an effort to bolster the government.

Also, fighting last year between Lebanese troops and al-Qaida-inspired Sunni Muslim militants in northern Lebanon in which hundreds died marked a turning point in U.S. military support.

During the three-month battle, the U.S. and its Arab allies airlifted to the Lebanese army equipment and ammunition, especially heavy artillery shells _ instrumental in crushing the militants at the time.

However, suspected militants have targeted the army in two car bombings in the last two months in the northern port city of Tripoli, killing 25 people, many of them soldiers.

In addition, the recent Syrian border build-up has Lebanese anti-Syrian politicians worried that Damascus could intervene militarily in Lebanon under the pretext of cracking down on Sunni extremists, particularly after the Sept. 27 car bombing in Damascus which killed 17 people. That attack was also blamed on Islamic militants.

Syrian President Bashar Assad has said the deployment is aimed at cracking down on smugglers and told Suleiman in a telephone call Sunday that it was in line with a U.N. resolution requiring the tightening of the border.

Still, the State Department on Monday said it was concerned by the Syrian military activity.

"Any intervention by Syrian troops into Lebanon would be unacceptable," deputy spokesman Robert Wood told reporters in Washington. "The recent terrorist attacks that took place in Tripoli and Damascus should not serve as a pretext for further Syrian military engagement."

Syria withdrew its forces from Lebanon in 2005 in the upheaval after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which many here blame on Damascus. Syria has denied involvement.

Separately, the U.S. Embassy has issued a warning to its citizens about potential violent actions targeting Americans in Lebanon and called on its nationals to increase their security awareness. It said the threats were particularly high in the first half of October.

Associated Press Writer Matthew Lee from Washington contributed to this report.

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