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Contributed by Nafez Qawas, Daily Star correspondent
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BEIRUT: President Michel Sleiman reassured Lebanese emigrants on Tuesday that the financial and security situations in the country were secure, and urged them to make investments in their homeland. Speaking Tuesday during a meeting with members of the Sao Paulo Municipality council headed by Gilberto Kassab, of Lebanese descent, Sleiman said because of international confidence and the efforts and remittances of the emigrant community, Lebanon avoided the negative repercussions of the global credit crunch.

Sleiman called for bolstering treaties signed between Lebanon and Brazil and the enhancement of bilateral ties through more frequent exchanges of official visits.

The president on Tuesday met with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, who briefed him about talks he had in Sharm el-Sheikh on the sidelines of the international donors conference for the reconstruction of Gaza.

Siniora had met Tuesday with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who reportedly told the premier that Lebanon will not be the victim of regional deals.

An-Nahar newspaper said on Tuesday that Siniora's talks in Egypt's Red Sea resort succeeded in "shifting focus back to Lebanon."

According to the daily, the delegation has stressed Lebanon's need for Arab and international support, not only on a financial level, but also on diplomatic and political levels.

An-Nahar quoted sources in the delegation as saying that Siniora reiterated to Clinton the importance of Lebanon's parliamentary elections.

Clinton, for her part, renewed US commitment to Lebanon.

"Be assured that Lebanon will not be on any [negotiation] table, not on a small table or a big table," Clinton reportedly told Siniora and his accompanying delegation.

She also reiterated her country's support for Lebanon's independence and stability.

In other developments, France asked Yemen to inquire about Syria's delay in appointing an ambassador to Beirut, after Paris did not receive a "convincing answer" on the issue, pan-Arab daily Ash-Sharq al-Awsat reported Tuesday.

The newspaper said Paris tasked Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh with "investigating" the Syrian delay.

Syrian President Bashar Assad met with Saleh last week.

In October, Syria and Lebanon formally established diplomatic ties, six decades after the Mideast neighbors gained independence from France.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem and his Lebanese counterpart Fawzi Salloukh signed a document launching the ties in Syria's capital, Damascus.

The two sides were to open open embassies in each other's capitals before the end of 2008. In December, Lebanon appointed Michel Khoury as ambassador to Damascus. Syria has yet to appoint its ambassador to Beirut.

Ash-Sharq al-Awsat quoted an official source as saying that Paris "has not yet received a convincing answer" from

Syrian authorities about the delay.

Last month, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner expressed regret that Syria did not yet send an ambassador to Beirut, saying the head of the mission should have been appointed weeks ago.

Official sources told the Saudi daily that French President Nicolas Sarkozy would reiterate France's support for Lebanon during President Sleiman's visit to Paris on March 16-17.

Separately, media reports said Tuesday that a fifth round of dialogue on Lebanon's defense strategy sidestepped the thorny issue that was supposed to be its focus.

Political leaders discussed issues like election-related appointments, particularly those of the Constitutional Council.

A statement at the end of the two-hour talks urged the government to speed up steps toward the formation of the Constitutional Council, "which is a credible reference to rule on any vote fraud."

The top leaders also agreed to continue a search for a common understanding to draw up a unified blueprint for a national defense strategy and to cooperate with authorities to achieve "the highest degrees possible" of security and political stability in the build-up to the June 7 parliamentary elections.

Sleiman, who presided over Monday's session, was quoted Tuesday by As-Safir newspaper as telling the conferees that general elections would not be constitutional without a constitutional council.

As-Safir on Tuesday published inside information as well as the minutes of the session.

According to the newspaper, Democratic Gathering leader MP Walid Jumblatt was said to have told dialogue leaders that he had several "observations to make" regarding the appointments of deputy governors at the central bank of Lebanon, but announced he was retracting his remarks.

It said Jumblatt instead entrusted Sleiman to deal with the matter.

Also according to As-Safir, a dispute erupted between Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun and MP Butros Harb after Aoun accused the parliamentary majority March 14 Forces of "lying and stealing."

In other developments, Speaker Nabih Berri traveled to Tehran Tuesday to take part in a conference on Israeli war crimes against the Palestinian people 22-day offensive in Gaza.

MPs Nabil Nicola, Marwan Fares, Salim Aoun and Hasan Hoballah also left Beirut Monday to attend the conference.

Former Cabinet Minister Wi'am Wahhab, and former MPs Nasser Qandil and Abdullah Qassir, had already arrived in Tehran to attend the meeting, along with several other Lebanese political figures.

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