

Explosion Hits Iranian Bus in Syria, Damascus Says 'No Terrorist Act' Behind Blast

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An explosion ripped through a bus carrying Iranian pilgrims in Syria's Sayyida Zainab neighborhood on Thursday and Syrian Interior Minister Saeed Mohammad Sammour ruled out a terrorist attack.

It was also not immediately clear exactly how many people died in the blast which occurred Thursday morning. In a statement to state-run Syrian TV, Sammour said three people were killed in the explosion near a bus parked at a gas station in a Damascus suburb.

He said the bus driver and two gas station workers were killed when a tire they were pumping air into exploded.

There were conflicting reports on the number of casualties. While Al-Jazeera TV said six passengers were killed, Iranian state-run Press TV said as many as 12 people may have been killed.

The explosion coincided with a visit to Damascus by the head of Iranian National Security Council Saeed Jalili.

On the other hand, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea asked whether Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun "would retrieve the church bells existing in Moukhtara, as he claims." In an interview with Al-Akhbar daily published Friday, Geagea stressed that March 14 is still "persistent and strong" and supported his opinion by pointing at the latest victories in universities and syndicates.

Answering a question, Geagea said that the relation with his allies in March 14 and with Phalange Party is an "excellent relation."

Geagea described the situation in Lebanon as good "except that Lebanon is threatened to enter the eye of the storm due to the negative development in the Iranian nuclear standoff."

LF leader warned that the situation between the international community and Iran may deteriorate toward a military conflict that will spread to Lebanon "because Hizbullah is a part of the Ummah (Muslim World)."

"The endurance of the Islamic regime in Iran is related to its acquiring of nuclear power, whether for peaceful or non-peaceful aims," added Geagea.

Geagea said the Faqih Rule endorsed by Hizbullah gives Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei "the right to decide the political decisions of the Ummah."

"The protection of Lebanon involves keeping it away from those (regional) conflicts and full commitment to implementing Resolution 1701 -- the thing not happening now," added Geagea.

Geagea said that the priorities of the government are to provide stability and to improve the social and economical situations.

"Minister Ibrahim Najjar stayed in the government to implement the reform plan inside the Justice Ministry, the thing he was not able to achieve in the previous government," answered Geagea to a question.

Regarding Hariri's anticipated visit to Syria, Geagea conditioned the participation of Minister Najjar by whether its program would include "the causes backed by LF since four years: Border demarcation and solving the detainees' issue."

Geagea stressed that LF does not avoid discussing any political issue, but it does not see the timing as "appropriate" to discuss the abolition of political sectarianism.

Meanwhile, Prosecutor of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon Daniel Bellemare -- who continued his meetings with Lebanese officials on Thursday -- said that there is no specific date for the indictment issuance in the case of Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri who was killed in a massive bomb blast on the Beirut seafront in February 2005. Earlier Thursday, Bellemare met with Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar.

Bellemare had met with President Michel Suleiman, Speaker Nabih Berri, and PM Saad Hariri on Wednesday. He was

accompanied by Lebanon's Deputy Prosecutor General Judge Jocelyn Tabet.

Statements issued by Bellemare's office said STL's Prosecutor cannot set a timeframe for the issuance of the indictment.

Bellemare reiterated that the main goal of his visit was to revive hope for the Lebanese people, especially the families of the victims, and to reassure them about the tribunal's commitment to exert all possible efforts to fulfill its mission in total independency.

STL's Prosecutor expressed his optimism "in light of progress achieved by the investigation", and added that the tribunal commits to the highest standards of an entirely judicial institution which has a sole objective of finding the truth in cases under its jurisdiction.

Bellemare stressed upon the importance of Lebanese trust in the integrity of the tribunal. He added that the mission of the prosecutor's office was to "try terrorists, achieve justice for the victims, and contribute in putting an end to escaping punishment in Lebanon."

The Hague-based tribunal was set up by a U.N. Security Council resolution in 2007 to try suspects in the murder of Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri.

The bombing was widely blamed on Syria although Damascus has denied any involvement. A U.N. commission of inquiry said it had found evidence to implicate Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services but there are no suspects in custody.