

Hezbollah forces Lebanese government collapse

Contributed by Now
Thursday, 13 January 2011

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Lebanon's unity government collapsed on Wednesday after Hezbollah and its allies resigned from the cabinet over a UN probe into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Energy Minister Gebran Bassil told a press conference that 10 ministers from the 30-member cabinet had tendered their resignations because of a long-running dispute with Prime Minister Saad Hariri -- son of the slain leader -- over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).

The announcement by Bassil, a member of the Christian Free Patriotic Movement close to Hezbollah, came just as Hariri was meeting in Washington with US President Barack Obama on the crisis.

An 11th minister close to President Michel Sleiman also quit on Wednesday, thus providing the number of resignations needed to topple the government.

The Shia group Hezbollah and its allies have for months been pressing Hariri to disavow the STL on the grounds that it is part of a US-Israeli plot.

Hezbollah's camp, which is backed by Iran and Syria, on Tuesday gave the Western-backed Hariri until Wednesday to convene a cabinet meeting on the tribunal.

According to unconfirmed press reports, the STL is poised to indict senior Hezbollah members in connection with Rafik Hariri's 2005 assassination, a scenario the party vehemently rejects.

Environment Minister Mohammad Rahhal, who is close to Hariri, told AFP Hezbollah's decision to quit the government was aimed at paralyzing the state and forcing the premier to reject the tribunal.

"They think that by piling the pressure on him, Hariri will bend but they are mistaken," Rahhal said.

The Sunni premier has held talks in recent days in New York with Saudi King Abdullah, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon over the crisis.

Mustapha Allouch, a senior member of Hariri's Future Movement, said Hezbollah and its allies had timed the announcement of the government collapse to coincide with the premier's meeting with Obama at 1500 GMT.

"They want Hariri to enter the meeting with the US president as an ex-premier or as head of a caretaker government," Allouch told AFP. "But the real goal is to deal a moral blow to the United States."

Syria and Saudi Arabia have for months been attempting to mediate the crisis but their efforts have failed, with rival Lebanese camps accusing each other of blocking attempts at a compromise.

"Saad Hariri was on the brink of making a major concession as concerns the tribunal but occult forces prevented him from doing so," Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt told AFP without elaborating.

The standoff between Hariri's camp and Hezbollah had paralyzed the government for months and sparked concerns of sectarian violence similar to that which brought the country close to civil war in May 2008.

-AFP/NOW Lebanon

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The government collapses
Matt Nash, January 12, 2011

Gebran Bassil announces the resignation of March 8 ministers from the government. (Dalati & Nohra)
Minutes after the 10 March 8 ministers resigned from the government, Minister of State Adnan as-Sayyed Hussein announced he too is quitting the cabinet, marking the collapse of Lebanon's 14-month-old national-unity government.

Minister Sayyed Hussein released a statement following a press conference in which newly resigned Minister of Energy and Free Patriotic Movement member Gebran Bassil announced the resignations of March 8 ministers saying he too will resign, meaning 11 of 30 cabinet ministers have quit. According to the Lebanese constitution, the government has collapsed and a new one must be formed.

Sayyed Hussein is one of the five ministers chosen by the president under a 15-10-5 power-sharing deal orchestrated among the head of state, March 14 and March 8 forces following parliamentary elections in June 2009. After months of wrangling, the cabinet was formed in November 2009.

The government collapse comes after months of deadlock over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which March 8 wants the country to reject but which March 14 insists on supporting. It also marks the apparent failure of mediation by Saudi Arabia and Syria to hammer out a solution to the impasse.

Simon Salame, a Constitutional Law professor at the Lebanese University's law school in Jal al-Dib, told NOW Lebanon that the parliament must now meet, and the president will have to poll the 128-member body to reach consensus on naming a new prime minister.

Once a new prime minister is found, negotiations over forming a new government can begin, Salame said, noting that, as after the summer 2009 elections, this can take months. He said state institutions will continue to function at the most basic levels, but no new decisions, laws or decrees can be passed or made until a new government is formed.

March 8 is "making a point of escalation" and "pressuring as much as possible" Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who was in Washington DC Wednesday evening and met with US President Barack Obama as the ministers began their press conference, Sahar Atrache, a Beirut-based analyst with the International Crisis Group, told NOW Lebanon.

The cabinet has not met since December 15, 2010, as March 8 ministers demanded the government vote on allowing the Judicial Council to hear cases involving people who gave false testimony to a UN committee investigating the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Saad Hariri, Atrache said, was "trying to gain time and wait" until the Special Tribunal issues indictments. The UN-backed court is widely expected to soon indict members of Hezbollah for the assassination, and the Party of God and its allies have been calling for Hariri to denounce the court.

"The resignations are a new way of dealing with [this impasse]. This is another escalation," Atrache said.

Boutros Harb, Labor Minister in the now-defunct government, told a press conference after the resignations that, "Bargaining [at the expense] of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is [out of the question]. [Since] we are concerned about the country, we announce that we are open to dialogue that is not at the expense of justice. We are waiting for Prime Minister Saad Hariri to return [to Lebanon] to hold an extended March 14 coalition meeting in order to officially announce our stance."

Hariri did not make a statement about the government's collapse.

From NOW Lebanon's office in Dekwaneh, a suburb of Beirut, the sound of fireworks could be heard following the government's dissolution. In Beirut's Bourj Abi Haidar neighborhood, residents told NOW Lebanon that the atmosphere felt stressful, similar to when clashes broke out between supporters of Hezbollah and the predominantly Sunni Islamist organization Al-Ahbash in the area in August 2010.

Mohammad Dah, 20, an argileh shop owner, told NOW Lebanon, "Our business is very good in this situation because everyone is at home. They have no jobs, nothing, so they call us [to deliver water pipes]. Everyone is talking a lot. They're saying today fighting will happen."

Ahmad Nouredine, 25, told NOW Lebanon, "We think it will go back to what it was like in 1975, and there will be war between the Muslims and Christians, just like what happened in Sudan and Egypt."

Rania, 30, who preferred not to give her last name, said, "It's something very different. It's a miserable situation, but I don't know what will happen."

With the government formerly in deadlock over the STL, March 8 on Tuesday gave President Michel Sleiman and Hariri an ultimatum: hold a cabinet meeting to discuss "ways to confront the STL" within 24 hours or the March 8 ministers will resign. Foreign governments — including France, the US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey — called for stability in Lebanon and urged ministers to keep the government from collapsing in the hours before it fell.

Sarah Lynch and Garo Fakrajian contributed reporting for this article.

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