

Welch assures allies in Beirut that Lebanon is not for trade

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BEIRUT, Lebanon - A senior U.S. official pledged Wednesday the United States will not use Lebanon as a bargaining tool — an attempt to allay fears that Washington's recent talks with Syria and Iran could weaken American resolve here.

David Welch, assistant U.S. secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, also said he expects the U.N. Security Council will establish an international tribunal in the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

He dismissed fears that creating the court, which is at the core of the political crisis here, without Lebanon's parliamentary approval could lead to violence despite Hezbollah's rejection of such a course.

Welch stressed that the U.S. will not abandon Lebanon.

“The future of Lebanon is not something that is negotiable against other interests the United States may have in the area. This won't happen,” he told The Associated Press in an interview at the heavily fortified U.S. Embassy compound in a hilly suburb overlooking the Mediterranean north of Beirut. “President Bush has pledged to support the country of Lebanon. We will do so.”

There have been concerns that recent American contacts with Syria and Iran over Iraq could result in a softening of U.S. support for the Lebanese government, which is facing an incessant campaign by the opposition led by Hezbollah, a Syria and Iran ally, to topple it.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem met at an Egyptian resort during a conference on Iraq last month, breaking a high-level boycott for over two years. U.S. and Iran have said they will hold upcoming talks in Baghdad about Iraq's security.

The recent diplomatic shifts have led to fears here that the Bush administration could trade with the Syrians and the Iranians over Lebanon in return for support for its policies in Iraq, where American forces are coming under attack from insurgents and militants. Washington accuses both Damascus and Tehran of supporting. Syria and Iran deny the accusations.

Many in Lebanon also have not forgotten how the United States abandoned its allies when the Reagan administration led an ill-fated peacekeeping mission in Beirut in 1982-84. U.S. forces were attacked and fired on by militias in support of the government.

Two U.S. embassy compounds were struck by suicide bombers and the U.S. Marine base at the airport was destroyed during that period. In all, more than 270 Americans were killed by the time the intervention ended and Syria and its allies took over — some say with implicit U.S. consent. Damascus controlled Lebanon until Hariri's assassination after which Washington led an international campaign that forced Syria to withdraw its army from Lebanon two months later.

Welch played down the recent talks with Syria and Iran, saying they were “very limited.”

Welch's two-day visit to Lebanon comes amid a political impasse over the Hariri tribunal. The tensions could only worsen. Lebanese leaders have failed to agree on the presidential elections in November. The political crisis has taken on an increasingly sectarian tone and erupted into street battles, killing 11 people in recent months.

Welch met with Prime Minister Fuad Saniora and others including some opposition leaders — except Hezbollah, which the U.S. lists as a terrorist organization. He did not meet with President Emile Lahoud, a staunch Syria ally.

Hezbollah's 11 lawmakers slammed the visit, accusing Welch of “flagrant interference … and provocative, subversive positions” that would complicate the crisis. The bloc said in a statement that inviting international intervention was “the greatest crime.”

The U.N. Security Council has authorized creation of the Hariri tribunal but its approval has been stuck in parliament, where the opposition-allied speaker refused to convene a session. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Tuesday said it has become necessary for the Security Council to act after receiving a letter from Saniora asking the council to impose the tribunal.

“That’s a very powerful recommendation,” Welch said of Ban’s statement. “I expect the council will act … in due course, this will pass,” he said of the tribunal.

Welch also was critical of Hezbollah for keeping their weapons. “We do not understand what is the purpose of the Hezbollah party having weapons,” he said. “What is the intent to use these weapons for? The conclusion that many have is that they want to be able to intimidate their way into politics. That’s the wrong basis for a political dialogue in result.”

Hezbollah and its allies have said the real goal of American policy in Lebanon is to disarm the Shiite Muslim militant group, whose guerrillas fought Israeli forces in last year’s summer war and lobbed thousands of rockets into northern Israel.

A U.N. resolution also calls for disarming militias, and Welch said disarming Hezbollah was a matter for the Lebanese to solve. -AP