

Rice to Syria: Hands Off Tribunal Jurors

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U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has warned Syria to keep its hands off the jurors who are going to prosecute the assassins of slain former Premier Rafik Hariri.

"One thing we'll be talking about is how to make certain these people can be secure in their work," Rice told reporters on Tuesday after discussing plans for the tribunal with Prime Minister Fouad Saniora.

Asked how outsiders could safeguard the Lebanese tribunal members, Rice noted that supporters of the late Rafik Hariri blamed Syria and its affiliates for political killings that followed the 2005 assassination.

"One thing is to make sure there is a spotlight on the problem of intimidation and the kinds of assassinations that have taken place in Lebanon," Rice said.

The United Nations Security Council is creating a tribunal to consider the Hariri case, after Lebanon's parliament, deadlocked between opponents and allies of longtime overlord Syria, failed to convene the panel on its own.

The tribunal underlies the current political standoff in Lebanon, the country's most serious crisis of governance since the end of the 1975-90 civil war.

Saniora's government and the opposition led by the Syrian-backed Hizbullah are struggling for power, and rival Lebanese politicians have not met since a national dialogue conference ended last year without agreement.

The anti-Syrian forces contend that Syria fears the tribunal and is using its influence in Lebanese politics to try to kill or cripple it.

U.N. officials have said the tribunal could take up to a year to establish, and with the investigation ongoing, it remains unclear who would face trial. The panel's members have not been selected.

A massive suicide truck bomb in Beirut killed Hariri and 22 others in February 2005. A U.N. investigator said the assassination's complexity suggested Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services played a role. Four Lebanese generals, top pro-Syrian security chiefs, have been under arrest for 20 months, accused of involvement.

Syria has denied any involvement in the bombing and has said it will not cooperate with the tribunal.

Syria held political and military sway in tiny neighboring Lebanon for some three decades. Besides armed troops on Beirut streets, Syrian intelligence forces were often a shadowy but pervasive force in Lebanese daily life.

Rice's 90-minute breakfast meeting with Saniora closed out a two-day diplomatic trip to Paris. The U.S. and France have teamed up to pressure Syria to keep out of the affairs of Lebanon, and to bolster the Western-backed Saniora's tenuous hold on power. (AP-Naharnet)

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