

Lebanon's 14 feuding factions meet in France (w/Video)

Contributed by Administrator
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PARIS: Lebanon's rival parties met in a French chateau yesterday for unusual and long-awaited talks meant to break the ice among foes mired in a political and sectarian crisis threatening to tear their country apart. The closed-door meetings, organized by France with US and Iranian approval, were not expected to end the political deadlock between the Western-backed prime minister and the Hezbollah-led opposition. But participants called it good news that the talks were happening at all. "It is exceptional to be meeting again, after all the obstructions," said pro-Hezbollah legislator Ibrahim Kenaan, representing Christian leader Michel Aoun. "I think we can have real dialogue.

The meetings yesterday and today at La Celle Saint Cloud west of Paris mark the first time the 14 parties are meeting since a national dialogue conference in November that failed to resolve the tensions. Since then the country's worst political crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war has deepened. Parliament and government are barely functioning. Prime Minister Fuad Saniora refuses to step down and is locked in a fierce power-struggle with the Hezbollah-led, pro-Syrian opposition. Hezbollah almost backed out of the weekend talks, after French President Nicolas Sarkozy's comments this week that the Shiite Muslim group is a terrorist organization. Sarkozy's office later "clarified" his statement. The talks have no set agenda. Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and other French diplomats were there, but as observers, not mediators.

France, Lebanon's former colonial ruler, is playing a delicate diplomatic game in the volatile region. French envoys discussed plans for the meetings with American and Iranian counterparts and won their grudging approval -but came under criticism for not vetting them with Syria, Lebanon's longtime overseer. France has strong ties with some of the rival factions and hopes to use its leverage to encourage dialogue, but is keen not to be seen as dictating suggestions.

Critics say France and Kouchner are just seeking the limelight, since no one is expecting a breakthrough at the talks. But they will be closely followed in Lebanon for any sign of softening positions or failure, which would be certain to deepen the country's instability. "It is already a step forward that the meeting is taking place," said Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh, representing pro-Western Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. "We shouldn't set ambitions that are too high. But the French have had success where others have not," he said.

During last summer's war between Hezbollah and Israel, France was instrumental in getting the UN resolution for a cease-fire and fortified peacekeeping force for Lebanon. Hezbollah is the largest single block in Lebanon's parliament. The resignation of Hezbollah's two Cabinet ministers last year, along with other ministers from the pro-Syrian opposition, threw the country into its current crisis. The deadlock could also create a power vacuum or even lead to two rival governments if Parliament fails to elect a new president before the November 23 deadline for pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud to step down. Meanwhile, the Lebanese army has been battling Islamic militants in a Palestinian refugee camp in the north for weeks, in fighting that has killed at least 60 militants and 20 civilians. In the south, UN troops trying to bring peace to the Lebanese-Israeli border after last year's war fear a new flare-up of violence. - AP

 Announcement from the French Foreign Ministry

Inter-Lebanese meeting (Celle Saint-Cloud, July 14, 15 and 16, 2007)

An inter-Lebanese meeting will be held at the Chateau de la Celle Saint-Cloud on July 14, 15 and 16. The meeting will begin at 3:30 p.m. on Saturday and will end on Monday, July 16, at 10 a.m. with a press conference.

It will bring together representatives of the political forces involved in Lebanon's national dialogue and civil society.

The discussions, under the impetus of the minister, will focus on the need to strengthen the Lebanese state.

The event is not a regional or international conference, nor is it a session of national dialogue modeled on the one started in 2006 even though the groups invited are the same.

 From LBC TV

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Pictures from Day 1

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, center, gestures as he opens a conference with Lebanon's rival parties delegates, Saturday, July 14, 2007, in La Celle Saint-Cloud, southwest of Paris. Members of the country's 14 leading parties, including Hezbollah and its allies, gather in the chateau at Celle Saint-Cloud, on Saturday and Sunday behind closed doors, with no set agenda. It is the first time the 14 parties are meeting since a national dialogue conference in November that failed to resolve the tensions. Since then the country's worst political crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war has deepened. (AP Photo/Miguel Medina, Pool)

French Foreign Affairs Minister Bernard Kouchner, left, shakes hands with Nabil de Freig, a member of parliament of the Lebanon's presidential majority, Saturday, July 14, 2007 in La Celle Saint-Cloud, southwest of Paris. Members of the country's 14 leading parties, including Hezbollah and its allies, gather in the chateau at Celle Saint-Cloud, on Saturday and Sunday behind closed doors, with no set agenda. It is the first time the 14 parties are meeting since a national dialogue conference in November that failed to resolve the tensions. Since then the country's worst political crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war has deepened. (AP Photo / Miguel Medina, Pool)

French Foreign Affairs minister Bernard Kouchner(C) takes part in a meeting between Lebanon's political factions including the pro-Syrian opposition Hezbollah in La Celle-Saint-Cloud, western Paris. Lebanon's political factions began two days of talks in France to try to ease the deadlock paralysing the nation.(AFP/POOL/Miguel Medina)

French Foreign Affairs minister Bernard Kouchner, left, welcomes Nawaf Elmoussaoui, in charge of the International relations of Lebanon's pro-Syrian opposition Hezbollah, Saturday, July 14, 2007 in La Celle Saint-Cloud, southwest of Paris. Members of the country's 14 leading parties, including Hezbollah and its allies, gather in the chateau at Celle Saint-Cloud, on Saturday and Sunday behind closed doors, with no set agenda. It is the first time the 14 parties are meeting since a national dialogue conference in November that failed to resolve the tensions. Since then the country's worst political crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war has deepened. (AP Photo/Miguel Medina, Pool)

Lebanon's rival parties delegates arrive, Saturday, July 14, 2007, in La Celle Saint-Cloud, southwest of Paris. Members of the country's 14 leading parties, including Hezbollah and its allies, gather in the chateau at Celle Saint-Cloud, on Saturday and Sunday behind closed doors, with no set agenda. It is the first time the 14 parties are meeting since a national dialogue conference in November that failed to resolve the tensions. Since then the country's worst political crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war has deepened. (AP Photo/Miguel Medina, Pool)

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, left, welcomes Lebanon's rival parties delegates, Saturday, July 14, 2007, in La Celle Saint-Cloud, southwest of Paris. Members of the country's 14 leading parties, including Hezbollah and its allies, gather in the chateau at Celle Saint-Cloud, on Saturday and Sunday behind closed doors, with no set agenda. It is the first time the 14 parties are meeting since a national dialogue conference in November that failed to resolve the tensions. Since then the country's worst political crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war has deepened. (AP Photo/Miguel Medina, Pool)