

Saniora Seeking Renewal of U.N. Force's Mandate

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Prime Minister Fouad Saniora has asked the United Nations to renew the mandate of international peacekeepers in Lebanon, despite a car bomb attack last weekend that killed six U.N. troops in southern Lebanon.

"I am in no position to tell now" who was behind the Sunday car bombing in southern Lebanon that killed the Spanish peacekeepers -- three of them Colombian immigrants, Saniora told a news conference in Paris on Wednesday, adding that the investigation was continuing.

"I think the whole world is looking at this seriously. This is an affront against the international community, against security and stability in Lebanon," he said.

Saniora said he was talking to every member country of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and was hearing an "unequivocal commitment."

Later, Saniora arrived in Rome to receive the support of Premier Romano Prodi of Italy, which is the leading contributor to UNIFIL.

"The perpetrators of such a criminal incident really wanted to blackmail the UNIFIL forces and subject them to intimidation," Saniora said at a joint news conference with Prodi.

"I am quite certain that the consolidated and firm position by all the nations that constitute the UNIFIL forces will really send a strong and right message to the perpetrators," Saniora added.

Earlier in Paris, Saniora said he has asked U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to renew the UNIFIL mandate, which expires at the end of August. The 13,000-member force from 30 countries, deployed nearly a year ago, is to implement a U.N. Security Council resolution that ended the 34-day war last summer between Israel and the Syrian and Iranian-backed Hezbollah. UNIFIL's job also includes creating an area free of weapons in southern Lebanon and bringing peace to the Lebanon-Israel border.

Saniora on Wednesday met with Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. A day earlier, he met with President Nicolas Sarkozy and visiting U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

France is trying to organize a conference on the Lebanese conflict bringing together representatives of various parties involved, and Saniora said he supported it. However, he held out scant hope that such an initiative could bring peace, saying that the "first goal" of such a conference was, above all, "to break the ice."

Kouchner told reporters, "We stand by our Lebanese friends, stand by all of the Lebanese communities -- all of the communities, I'm telling you -- and if we can be useful by bringing them together, we'll furnish a venue where they can speak."

Lebanon is facing its most serious political crisis since the end of the 1975-90 civil war. Saniora's government and the Hezbollah-led opposition are locked in a fierce power struggle.

Rival Lebanese politicians have not met since a national dialogue conference ended last year without agreement.

Paris has had some difficulties in arranging the conference. An initial end-of-June date was extended to mid-July, but neither the French Foreign Ministry nor Saniora has been able to pinpoint a date.

Saniora said that a proposal for a meeting by the Arab League has hampered putting together a Paris conference. The French proposal came first, the prime minister said, and "the climate is favorable to moving forward with the French proposal."

Dialogue is the only way to resolve Lebanon's problems, Saniora said.

"We want Lebanon to be a nation, not a battlefield."(AP-Naharnet)(AP photo shows Saniora shaking hands with Prodi before talks in Rome.)

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