

Interview with Cedar's Rev March 14 MP Holed up w/ many others in a Hotel for fear of Assassination

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In no other democracy in the World is so many that are fighting for this democracy in Lebanon - taking refuge in various places for fear of their life. Prime Minister Siniora and his cabinet are sleeping in their offices - not having seen their homes in over a year, Most of the Cedar's Revolution MP's are either out of the country or holed up in the Phoenicia Hotel - again - for fear of assassination.

Lebanon and the Cedar's Revolution - Is Under a Violent Attack.

Security Fears Plague Lebanon

By ZEINA KARAM

The Associated Press, Washington Post

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BEIRUT, Lebanon -- The curtains are drawn shut. Security guards are on constant watch, pacing the hallways and searching visitors. Bomb detectors, police armored vehicles and checkpoints monitor traffic outside. The Phoenicia Hotel, a famous Beirut tourist draw, has become a fortress.

The hotel is housing about 40 Lebanese lawmakers from the ruling coalition who say they fear death at the hands of their foe Syria as the deeply divided parliament tries again to pick a president on Monday.

"It's like voluntary house arrest," lawmaker Mustafa Alloush said, sitting on a couch in a 14th-floor suite of an annex of the hotel as two security guards listened in.

"By staying here, we are hopefully making it more difficult, though not impossible, for them to kill us," he told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

Since legislator Antoine Ghanem was killed in a Sept. 19 car bombing, Alloush and his colleagues have been living under strict security in the five-star annex neighboring the hotel on Beirut's seaside, hoping to avoid a similar fate.

They accuse Syria of seeking to end the ruling coalition's small majority in the 128-seat Parliament _ 68 seats to the opposition's 59 _ by killing off lawmakers ahead of the presidential election.

Parliament is to try once again Monday to pick a president and break the deadlock between the pro-government majority and the pro-Syrian opposition led by the Shiite Muslim militant group Hezbollah. A September session failed to reach quorum because of an opposition boycott, and an October attempt was postponed as negotiators struggled to find a compromise candidate.

Failure to pick a replacement for pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, whose term expires Nov. 24, could result in two rival administrations.

Ghanem was the eighth anti-Syria figure and fourth governing coalition lawmaker to be assassinated in less than three years. Damascus denies involvement in all the assassinations, including the 2005 bombing death of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a few yards down the road from the Phoenicia.

The Phoenicia was the premier hotel in Beirut during the city's heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, but was then destroyed by fierce fighting in the 1975-1990 civil war. Its rebuilding and reopening in the 1990s made it a symbol of the capital's revival.

Now, as Lebanon's influential Maronite Catholic Church said this week, it is "an indication of the extent of deterioration in Lebanon."

Lawmakers are not the only ones on edge.

A few blocks away from the Phoenicia, Prime Minister Fuad Saniora and some of his ministers have made the government headquarters a home away from home _ rarely venturing out, using only bulletproof cars and decoy convoys.

Opposition leaders also travel under heavy escorts and live in fortified compounds. But some opposition legislators travel with relative ease.

In another worrisome development, the sight of civilians carrying weapons in public has increased.

In downtown Beirut this week, two armed motorists argued over the right of way and one of them was shot and killed.

The government has promised to take action against people carrying weapons in public but appears helpless.

The year-old political crisis and occasional bouts of street violence have led many Lebanese to rearm in case there is another civil war. Reports of private arms dealers doing a brisk business have dominated the media.

"The old weapons have been taken out, dusted and oiled up, and new weapons have been bought in alarming quantities," warned Omar Nashabe, a criminologist who writes on security issues for the opposition Al-Akhbar daily.

"They are ready to burn the country again," Nashabe told The Associated Press. However, he said there was no evidence of proliferation of heavy weaponry.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon last month called on all parties in Lebanon to "immediately halt all efforts to rearm and engage in weapons training, and to instead return to dialogue and conciliation."

Back in the safety of the Phoenicia's annex, lawmakers pass the time reading newspapers, surfing the Internet, receiving visitors and watching movies.

"Some of the guys also like to play cards. Others enjoy discussing politics or talking about literature and art," Alloush said. The legislator from lush green northern Lebanon tells of his longing to see the sun, saying he's been out of the hotel twice in nearly two months since he moved in.

An AP photographer was told by security escorts at the hotel he could do "anything except open the curtains," apparently for fear of snipers. Video footage was not permitted.

"This is a precedent, to have politicians from the ruling majority being targeted like this," Alloush said. "As long as the present Syrian regime exists, the assassinations will continue."

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