

Rice to Syria - You want better relations with the US and Arab World - Let Lebanon Choose President

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Rice Stipulates Facilitating Presidential Elections for Improving Ties with Damascus

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U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Wednesday that if Syria wants to improve its relations with Washington it will have to allow Lebanon to vote freely for its next president.

"I hear all the time that Syria wants to improve relations with the Arab world, wants to improve relations with the U.S.," Rice told reporters before Syria joins a Middle East peace conference in the United States next week.

"Well, stepping back and letting the Lebanese choose a president for Lebanon would be an awful good start," Rice added.

Lebanon's feuding political leaders and foreign envoys on Wednesday were engaged in intense last-minute negotiations to secure a compromise deal on a presidential candidate by a Friday deadline.

Political sources told AFP that the Western-backed ruling majority and the Syrian-backed Hizbullah-led opposition were discussing an accord that could see former minister Michel Edde elected president on Friday, when the mandate of incumbent head of state Emile Lahoud expires.

She said the talks were positive.

"I think those discussions should go on. But in final analysis, there is a majority in Lebanon, a legitimately elected majority, and in a final analysis that needs to go to the parliament and be decided," Rice added.

"And that is the point that we are making. And it really ought to be decided without foreign interference and certainly without any foreign intimidation," the top U.S. diplomat said.

Rice said that she had discussed Lebanon on Wednesday morning with French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, and the secretary general of the Arab League, Amr Mussa.

Four sessions of parliament to replace Lahoud have already been postponed for lack of agreement between the ruling majority and the opposition, which is backed by Syria and Iran.

Friday's scheduled vote in parliament is seen as a last ditch-attempt to avert a full blown crisis that could tear the country apart.(AFP)