

## Lebanon Postpones Elections - 4th Time

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By: Kenneth R. Timmerman

Lebanese officials postponed presidential elections for the fourth time on Tuesday, calling extra army and interior ministry troops to the capital to guard key roads and government buildings, as the possibility of terrorist attacks against members of parliament increased.

Some 40 members of parliament remained holed up in a high security wing of the seaside Phoenicia hotel, to protect them from a suspected Syrian and Iranian plot to assassinate them.

According to Lebanon's constitution, parliament must meet to elect a successor to President Emile Lahoud, whose term ends this Friday.

Failure to do so could mean Lebanon will have two opposing governments, one led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, who constitutionally is required to assume executive powers, and a second by Lahoud, who has said he will not relinquish his powers and disputes Siniora's legitimacy.

The United States has been backing Siniora, while Syria and Iran have backed Lahoud and would rather postpone the election indefinitely than accept a strong president.

Lebanon's political and religious communities were in an uproar today, as non-stop meetings with foreign emissaries continued.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner has flown to Beirut several times, and was attempting on Tuesday to find a presidential candidate acceptable to the opposing factions, including the Iranian-backed Hezbollah party.

The secretary general of the Arab league, former Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa, was also in Beirut, and told reporters last night he was downbeat about reaching an agreement.

"It is not right to despair," he said after meeting President Lahoud. "There is still hope, although there are still difficulties."

Syria and Iran are trying to impose a candidate who will block the enforcement of U.N. Security Council resolutions that call for the disarmament of all militias, the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, and an international tribunal to prosecute those responsible for the February 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

The United States is supporting those U.N. resolutions, and has sought to encourage the leaders of the ad hoc Cedars Revolution, also known as the March 14 coalition, to stand firm and elect a strong president.

Following the 1991 Taef accord, Lebanon's Christian militias turned in their weapons, but the Iranian-backed Hezbollah was allowed to expand its military force, ostensibly as a "resistance" movement against Israeli occupation.

When Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah still refused to disarm, and last year provoked a bloody war with Israel by kidnapping Israeli soldiers inside Israel and pounding Israeli cities with Iranian and Syrian-made rockets.

The Syrians are particularly keen to prevent Lebanon from electing a president who would support the international tribunal tasked with investigating the February 2005 murder of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

Sources in Beirut tell Newsmax that United Nations investigators believe the 2005 assassination plot was hatched "at the highest levels of the Syrian government."

Dr. Walid Phares, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington, called yesterday on the United States to dispatch an aircraft carrier battle group to the Lebanese coast to deter an attack by Syrian or Iranian-backed forces.

Dr. Walid Phares warned that the Cedars Revolution "is on the verge of a crushing political defeat at the hands of

its own politicians, who have been incapable of electing a strong anti-terror president.

Lebanese members of parliament "are trying to cut deals with Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran" to elect a candidate who would soft-pedal the demands of the Lebanese people and the international community, he said.

Dr. Phares said that the United States should send a carrier battle group to the eastern Mediterranean that "could balance the weight of the Iranian Pasdaran and their missiles deployed in Lebanon, so that Tehran and Damascus aren't the only powers present in that small country."

Many Lebanese are now placing their hopes in active intervention by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who told Saad Hariri — the son of the assassinated prime minister — that he would encourage the Syrian and Iranian governments to go back off in their opposition to a new president.

Hariri met with Putin at his datcha outside Moscow on Tuesday. Putin's office released a statement after the meeting announcing that Foreign Minister Lavrov would travel to Damascus to insist on "the need for holding the presidential elections within the constitutional deadline."

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