

## **France, Saudi Arabia, Iran mediate Lebanese logjam**

By Hani M. Bathish

Daily Star staff

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BEIRUT: France has joined diplomatic efforts by Iran and Saudi Arabia to help Lebanon's rival political camps form a national unity government to avoid a political vacuum in the months leading up to the presidential elections. Quoting political sources, Reuters said French diplomats have suggested to the parliamentary majority that it accept the opposition's demand for veto power in the Cabinet now that UN Security Council has approved the formation of an international tribunal to try suspects in the slaying of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

"Ideas for a national unity government are under discussion," said Iranian Ambassador Mohammad Rida Shibani, who spoke to reporters after meeting Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri in Ain al-Tineh on Thursday. After his meeting, Shibani said the general atmosphere was good.

Asked if he was coordinating his efforts with Saudi Ambassador Abdel-Aziz Khoja, Shibani said: "There are joint French, Saudi and Iranian efforts and, more importantly, domestic Lebanese political efforts."

A senior opposition source told Reuters: "We are close to a formula to resolve the government crisis. We are putting the final touches on it, but we have to be cautious, as we have been down this road before only for things to unravel quickly."

Encouraged by the French, Khoja resumed mediation efforts with political leaders in the country, meeting with representatives of Hizbullah, Amal and the Change and Reform Bloc, as well as with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, parliamentary majority leader MP Saad Hariri and Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt.

Among the initiatives is the expansion of the 24-minister Cabinet by six ministers or giving the opposition 13 ministers in a new national unity cabinet, an idea originally put forward by Siniora.

Sources told the Central News Agency that Hariri is waiting for a response from the opposition, specifically from Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, to an invitation Hariri extended to focus attention on future political challenges now that the tribunal has been ratified.

The sources added that Hariri highlighted the serious security challenges of fundamentalist movements aiming to topple the government, which requires the Lebanese to reach an agreement and rectify prolonged divisions.

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Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh, in a recent magazine interview, said Siniora's resignation is out of the question: "We have extended our hands, and we will keep them extended to our resigned colleagues and to the representatives of the Free Patriotic Movement, and it is up to them to respond."

Hamadeh reiterated that nothing suggested by President Emile Lahoud would be accepted, adding that Lahoud's suggestion of a six-minister national salvation government is an attempt to revive the embattled president's flagging fortunes before his term in office ends.

A six-minister national salvation government was proposed during a meeting between Lahoud and Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir last month. Hamadeh said any new president "with Syrian leanings" would be unacceptable.

Hizbullah's deputy secretary general, Sheikh Naim Qassem, said if the majority re-evaluates its position and accepts a national unity government, then the majority will lose less than if it waits longer: "They cannot bide their time, nor can they hold [presidential] elections without a two-thirds majority. Waiting is an illusion and would lead to a dead end - we need to extend our hands to one another."

Hizbullah politburo member Ghaleb Abou Zeinab reiterated during a political rally on Thursday that the obvious solution is a national unity government based on the current government's original ministerial statement, adding that the opposition will not accept anything less than that.

Free Patriotic Movement leader MP General Michel Aoun said on Thursday that "an internal path is essential to any solution" to the political impasse. Aoun discussed his vision for a possible solution to the crisis with Italian Parliament Speaker Fausto Bertinotti in Rome. Aoun is in Rome for talks with the Vatican Secretary for State Relations, Msgr. Dominique Mamberti, and Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema.

In a statement Thursday, Lahoud urged all sides to form a unity cabinet in order "to save the country and confront any attempt to settle Palestinians in Lebanon and drive Lebanon into anarchy." - *With agencies*