

# Lebanese factions agree to avoid 'political violence'

*French foreign minister to visit to Lebanon to help parties pursue dialogue*

By Rym Ghazal

Daily Star staff

Monday, July 16, 2007

BEIRUT: Representatives of Lebanon's feuding political parties agreed at a meeting outside Paris on Sunday not to resort to "political violence" and to resolve the country's internal crisis peacefully, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner announced in a speech at the conclusion of two days of talks. "The dialogue will continue now on Lebanese land," Kouchner told reporters at a news conference in Paris.

At France's invitation, 31 representatives from Lebanon's 14 main political parties held closed-door talks Saturday and Sunday inside the La Celle Saint Cloud chateau outside Paris.

"We achieved progress during the talks," said Kouchner, who said he would visit Lebanon on July 28 and invited the head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, to join him. He said the two could help rival political factions continue their talks aimed at retrieving the country from its lengthening political paralysis.

A dialogue session in Lebanon is expected to take place among top-level leaders of the political factions. France's meeting was attended by deputy leaders of each party.

Kouchner said the meeting had succeeded in "breaking the ice" and reconnecting the antagonistic factions.

"The atmosphere was initially tense, then it slowly warmed up ... to reach a point I would call brotherly," he said.

Kouchner said the situation in Lebanon was "very dangerous" and stressed the importance of dialogue and of reaching an agreement on presidential elections and a unity government.

"The participants agreed on their commitment to Lebanon as an independent state, and refused any form of foreign interference," said Kouchner.

Kouchner did not confirm whether a French envoy will be sent to Syria after an envoy was sent to Iran. Syria has meanwhile urged France to play "honest broker" and avoid taking sides at the meeting.

Kouchner discussed with the Hizbullah delegation the fate of two Israeli soldiers captured at the beginning of the summer 2006 war with Israel. Later he said he had received "positive feedback" on the case and that negotiations are ongoing.

Asked whether he was told that the two captives were alive, Kouchner replied, "I really understood yes."

Hizbullah sent a delegation to Paris despite complaints from French Jewish groups who have branded the group a terrorist organization, in line with the US.

The talks Saturday and Sunday at the state-owned chateau west of Paris was organized by France, with US and Iranian approval, to bring together representatives from the 14 main factions in Lebanon. The meeting was not expected to bring about any solutions to the deadlock between the pro-government forces and the Hizbullah-led opposition.

The participants had been asked to shun all external contact during the talks to pre-empt "interference."  
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb>

Prior to Kouchner's news conference, Speaker Nabih Berri's brother, Mahmoud Berri, stressed the importance of having the presidential elections on time, and of having them according to the Constitution.

"We are committed to electing a president for Lebanon in accordance with Article 49 of the Constitution which calls for two thirds majority of the Parliament to elect the president," said Mahmoud Berri in Saint Cloud.

The majority has been pushing for "an absolute majority" to elect the president, instead of a two-thirds majority.

Berri said the speaker will call for a parliamentary session to take place in order to elect a new president on September 25.

Berri focused on the "youth of Lebanon" and the importance of re-establishing their trust in Lebanon by re-establishing

"stability" and "eradicating sectarian disputes."

The talks were the first time the main political factions have met since a series of national dialogue sessions last year that failed to resolve the tensions between the opposing camps.

A former colonial power, France has strong ties with some of the rival factions and hopes to use its clout to encourage dialogue.

The meeting focused on the theme of "strengthening the Lebanese state," after six opposition ministers quit the cabinet in November of last year, triggering the worst internal crisis since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war.

At the same time, the daily Pan Arab Al-Hayat newspaper said on Sunday Hizbullah representatives attended the talks after being approved by Iran.

Al-Hayat quoted Mohammad Rida Shibani, Iran's ambassador to Lebanon, as informing House Speaker Nabih Berri about "joint French-Iranian efforts" as well as "joint Iranian-Saudi efforts" to find a way out of the political crisis. It also quoted Iran's ambassador to France, Ali Ahani, as saying Tehran helped to get the dialogue underway in Paris.

Ahani told al-Hayat at a ceremony commemorating France's National Day at the Elysee Palace garden that Iran was looking forward to the convening of Lebanon's presidential elections on time.

It quoted Ahani as assuring that Tehran does not advocate the emergence of two governments or seeing the situation further deteriorating in Lebanon.

The Saudi Press Agency quoted a source at the Arab League as saying that the league suggested holding a meeting for the Arab Foreign Ministers Council on July 29. The meeting was initially set for July 15, but was postponed due to the Paris trip.

The meeting is expected to include discussions on the last visit to Lebanon by Moussa.

- ***With agencies***