

Qatar has reservations about U.N. court proposal

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Qatar has set conditions for voting in favour of a U.N. resolution to set up a special tribunal to try those suspected of killing former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005.

The prime minister of Qatar, one of the U.N. Security Council's 15 members, said late on Monday his country would oppose a resolution rejected by the majority of Lebanese or one which would lead to conflict over the authority of a tribunal.

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani told reporters: "We have been talking about the prerogatives of the court and the Lebanese consensus on it. We cannot accept that Lebanon enter a dark tunnel.

"We don't want to pass a resolution which the majority of Lebanese reject and (then) find all the parties in conflict over the prerogatives of the court," he added.

Western powers put their plan for the Hariri court before the Security Council on Friday. Russia, one of five permanent members with veto powers, objected to its compulsory nature.

The sponsors -- the United States, Britain and France -- played down the Russian concerns and said they still expected their resolution to pass.

The plan to set up the court is highly divisive in Lebanon. The parliamentary majority favours the resolution but the opposition led by the Shi'ite Muslim group Hezbollah disagrees with the latest proposals on its structure and mandate.

Those in favour say the opposition is trying to protect the government of neighbouring Syria, which they accuse of assassinating Hariri in Beirut in February 2005. Syria says it had nothing to do with the killing.

Saad al-Hariri, Hariri's son and the leader of the parliamentary majority, criticised Qatar in comments published in al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper on Tuesday, saying he expected the Gulf state to vote against the tribunal because "it supports Syria and Iran and all the pleasant people in the region".