

Sleiman Schedules Start of Dialogue for September 16

'Also Lebanese homes are open for reconciliation, and so is the presidential palace'

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BEIRUT: Lebanon's political leaders will begin a national dialogue next Tuesday in a bid to resolve their political differences, President Michel Sleiman announced on Tuesday.

"I invite those who signed the Doha Accord ... to come meet here in Baabda [Palace] on September 16, 2008 at 11:00 a.m.," the president told an iftar meal he hosted for political and religious leaders to break

the day's Ramadan fast.

On May 21, feuding political parties ended an 18-month-long political crisis with an agreement in the Qatari capital that led to Sleiman's election and the formation of a national unity Cabinet. The Doha Accord also called for a national dialogue to be held under the president's auspices.

The talks are set to focus on forming a "national defense strategy" in which the relationship between the resistance and the military in defending the country is to be defined.

Controversy over Hizbullah's weapons intensified after its fighters captured two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid in July 2006 that Israel used as a pretext to launch a devastating 34-day war on Lebanon.

It boiled over again when Hizbullah fighters and their allies drove Sunni gunmen out of southern and western Beirut during clashes in May that left at least 65 people dead, the worst internal violence since the 1975-1990 Civil War.

The dialogue follows on from a 2006 initiative in which all major political leaders held several round-table meetings in hopes of forging political unity. The talks were interrupted by the war between Israel and Lebanon that summer.

Sleiman told his guests that Lebanon was facing three main dangers; Israeli threats, international terrorism, and the threat of the resettlement of Palestinian refugees here.

"In addition to the Israeli threats that are targeting our institutions and international terrorism which is rejected by all religions, a major danger facing Lebanon is preventing Palestinian refugees from returning to their homeland," he said.

Also on Tuesday, Future Movement leader Saad Hariri addressed the possibility of meeting Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, declaring that the "doors to Qoraytem [his family residence] are open for everybody."

"We are not against any meeting, particularly with Sayyed Nasrallah," Hariri told reporters after a meeting Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir at the latter's seat in Bkirki.

But the Future Movement leader refused to clarify whether his remarks meant that he was inviting Nasrallah to visit him at his residence.

In a televised speech on Sunday, Nasrallah said that he had no objection to meeting Hariri. "I have said I am ready to sit down with him - there's no disagreement about the principle ... only about the venue," Nasrallah said. "Our head-to-head has not taken place because of the security concerns facing both him and me."

Asked to comment on a shooting incident in Tripoli on Tuesday despite the signing of a reconciliation agreement by rival groups there a day earlier, Hariri said it was a separate incident that would have no effect on the pact.

"The reconciliation in Tripoli is extremely important because it included all parties ... I have no fears and the army can strictly deal with all security incidents," Hariri said.

Shots were fired in Tripoli's Abu Samra area during a fight between Osama Shaaban - brother of the Islamic Tawheed Party leader, Sheikh Bilal Shaaban - and a man identified as Abdel Hadi Hassoun. Shaaban said in a statement afterward that Hassoun has opened fire at his car in an attempt to kill him.

A similar incident took place between two families in the Bekaa town of Taalbaya. There was no word on casualties.

The Tripoli shooting came one day after a Sunni-Alawite reconciliation agreement was signed under the auspices of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

The six-point Tripoli Document calls for armed men to withdraw from the streets, security forces to deploy, people who fled their homes to return under army protection, compensation for material losses, alternate housing for those whose homes were destroyed and an economic development plan for the city.

In his address at the Presidential Palace on Tuesday, Sleiman praised the reconciliation agreement, describing it as a "bold step."

"All Lebanese homes are open for reconciliation and so is the Presidential Palace," he said.

Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea described the Sunni-Alawite reconciliation in Tripoli as a "victory for the Lebanese people."

"The reconciliation is a big victory for both the Lebanese people and Lebanese leaders, particularly Hariri and Siniora," he said.

Geagea said that the use of violence to settle disputes was pointless because "reconciliation is indispensable in the end."

The LF chief also called on Sleiman to call for national dialogue "as soon as possible."

In a separate development on Tuesday, Defense Minister Elias Murr appointed Brigadier General Edmond Fadel as head of the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) military intelligence.

Fadel was appointed upon the recommendations of both the LAF's recently appointed commander, General Jean Kahwaji, and the former head of military intelligence, Brigadier General Georges Khoury. - *With AFP*