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Weary Lebanese yearn for end to crisis

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By Tom Perry

BEIRUT, Nov 18 (Reuters) - Salam Abu Elias says watching Lebanese news is bad for her health. "I get headaches, stomach pains," she said, describing the effects of listening to the latest twists in Lebanon's year-long political crisis. Like many Lebanese, she assumes the worst if the country's feuding politicians cannot strike a deal this week to defuse their conflict, fearing the clock will be turned back to the days of the 1975-1990 civil war.

"We lived through war. We know its horrors," she said.

Already having exacted a heavy toll on Lebanese, the political standoff enters a critical juncture this week as the rival camps seek to agree on a new compromise president -- with fears of bloodshed if they don't.

Many people have put their lives on hold, postponing travel plans or putting off big purchases. Some have even arranged to evacuate their families from a country facing "the brink of the abyss", according to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The protracted turbulence has forced people out of business, out of the country and even onto medication.

"There is a big increase in tranquilisers, either by prescription or over the counter," said psychiatrist Elio Sassine. "Even most optimistic people tend to think something will happen. The news has been so bad, you cannot but be pessimistic or anxious.

"People are very irritable, angry on the roads. In social settings, they fight a lot about political issues."

Some bars and restaurants ask customers to steer clear of politics. But it is hard to avoid the subject on TV. Stations give politicians and pundits hours of air time to analyse a situation many have given up trying to understand.

The public now waits to see whether parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, a leading member of the opposition, and Saad al-Hariri, a key member of the governing coalition, can agree on a president before a parliament vote called for Wednesday.

The chosen candidate will be approved by parliamentarians at the session, assuming the two can agree by then.

Many are frustrated with the politicians for allowing the crisis to drag on at a heavy cost to ordinary citizens. "Their power game is not taking into consideration the things that concern us," civil society activist Gilbert Doumit said.

"We are completely damned," said Doumit, an organiser of the 'Khalass' campaign calling on the leaders to end to the crisis. Khalass, meaning enough, was born out of "these feelings of anxiety -- fear of another cycle of civil violence", he said.

"The message to the politicians is that you are responsible for managing this crisis in a civil and peaceful way."

If Lebanon emerges from this week with a president acceptable to both sides, Jamila Hussein says she is looking forward to her children visiting from overseas.

"If there are elections with consensus, this reflects positively on all of us. I'll

pick up the phone and tell them to come."

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