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Rival factions return to arms as Lebanon stares into the abyss

Nicholas Blanford in Beirut

The centre of Beirut will be a sealed-off military zone today as MPs gather to elect a new president in a last-ditch attempt to prevent Lebanon from plunging into chaos and violence.

Emile Lahoud, the pro-Syrian head of state, leaves office at midnight today, but despite intense international mediation, no agreement appears to have been reached on a new president acceptable to the bitterly divided political camps.

The US-backed March 14 block, which holds a slim majority, has said that it will attend today's session of parliament and threatened to elect a president from their own ranks if a consensus candidate is not found.

But the pro-Syrian Opposition, led by the powerful Shia Hezbollah party, says that it will boycott the election and has hinted it will respond by forming a rival government, a move that many Lebanese fear will lead to violence between heavily armed rival factions and tear the country apart.

That grim outlook appeared to draw closer last night with political sources saying that the continued lack of agreement could lead to the election being postponed, plunging Lebanon into constitutional limbo.

"Last day before zero hour: either a miracle or vacuum," the An-Nahar daily headline said yesterday.

The foreign ministers of France, Spain and Italy are in Beirut shuttling between political leaders to push for agreement over the choice of president. In a further sign of international concern, President Sarkozy of France spoke by phone on Wednesday to Saad Hariri, head of the anti-Syrian block, and Michel Aoun, the opposition candidate for president.

All three European countries contribute to a 13,300-strong United Nations peacekeeping force in south Lebanon and are aware that their soldiers would be at even greater risk if Lebanon fell apart.

Also at risk are MPs belonging to the March 14 block, more than 40 of whom have spent the past two months holed up in an annex of the five-star Phoenicia hotel in central Beirut. Four of their colleagues have been murdered since the June 2005 general election. Visitors pass through metal detectors and are escorted by bodyguards to meeting rooms.

The curtains are kept closed to avoid sniper fire. On the rare occasions MPs travel, they go in small unmarked cars and remove the chips from their mobile phones so that they cannot be tracked.

"The guys are all depressed staying here. It's like a prison," said Mosbah Ahdab, an MP from Tripoli, who moved into the hotel on Monday.

In an attempt to break the impasse last week, France persuaded Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, the patriarch of the Maronite church, to submit a list of candidates from which the rival factions could select a president. Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system decrees that the president must be a Maronite. But neither camp is showing any sign of flexibility.

With Lebanon's political woes inextricably linked to broader tensions in the Middle East, few expect an imminent solution, further complicating international efforts to secure a peace agreement at a summit in Annapolis next week.

The Lebanese Government is supported by the United States, France and Saudi Arabia, which seek to disarm Hezbollah and keep Lebanon within a pro-Western orbit – free from Syrian influence and an obstacle to Iran's regional ambitions.

The Lebanese Opposition prefers to keep Lebanon aligned with Iran and Syria, distrusting Washington's interest in Lebanon, which it believes seeks only to weaken Hezbollah and protect Israel.

“Everyone in Lebanon is waiting for the balance of power in the region to clarify itself,” Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Endowment’s Middle East Centre in Beirut, said.

The worsening crisis has resulted in a surge in black market arms sales as worried Lebanese protect themselves from an uncertain future. The weapon of choice is the AK47 assault rifle. A year ago the most popular version of this classic weapon, the 1977-vintage “circle 11” (named after the markings stamped into the rifle’s metal work), cost £250. Today it is worth about £450. “People are buying guns more than ever. They are expecting a war,” said Abu Jamil, an arms dealer.

The rise in arms sales has led to an increase in shooting practice in the Lebanese mountains, where the distant crackle of rifle fire is becoming common at weekends. The unrelenting political crisis and speculation that militias are being formed has left many Lebanese aghast at the thought that the country could be sliding into civil war once more.

“How can we even be thinking of war again? Have we learnt nothing?” Hadi Sfeir, 42, a shopkeeper, asked.

A civil rights group called Khalass – Arabic for Enough! - began a series of actions this week to highlight the disgust it feels toward the political class. “We are extremely frustrated. I don’t think the politicians care about what ordinary Lebanese care about like the economy and being able to live in peace with each other,” Carmen Jeha, an activist with Khalass, said.

History of conflict

1975 Bus attack by Christian gunmen kills 27 and precipitates a civil war among Sunni, Shia and Christian communities

1976-78 Syrian troops enter to restore order; Israel controls south

1982 US, French and Italian peacekeepers arrive, but withdraw after a suicide attack kills 296 of their troops

1988 Beirut splits between Muslim control in west and Christian in east; the latter declares war against Syrian troops

1990 Syrian air strike against Christian government leader, who flees to the French Embassy effectively ending the civil war

2000 Israeli forces withdraw from Southern Lebanon

2005 Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s murder blamed on Syria. Street protests force Syrian withdrawal

2006 Israel attacks Beirut and south Lebanon after Hezbollah forces in Lebanon seize Israeli troops.

January 2007 Hezbollah calls general strike to force Government to resign

Source: Times archive

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