

Lebanon crisis summit in Syria

Leaders to discuss maintaining stability

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Istanbul/Beirut: Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan will go to Damascus today to discuss with Syrian and Qatari leaders how to help prevent Lebanon sliding deeper into crisis, a Turkish foreign ministry spokesman said yesterday.

The 14-month-old unity government of Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri collapsed on Wednesday after ministers from the Hezbollah movement and its allies quit.

The resignations followed the failure of regional powers Saudi Arabia and Syria to forge a deal to reduce tension over the UN-backed investigation into the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father, statesman Rafik Hariri.

Erdogan will meet Syrian President Bashar Al Assad and Qatar's Emir Shaikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Turkish foreign ministry spokesman told journalists travelling with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to Iraq, the Anatolian news agency reported.

After leaving Baghdad, Davutoglu will join his prime minister in Damascus, and meet Syrian and Qatari officials.

Lebanese President Michel Sulaiman was to begin consultations yesterday to form a new government, but it was unclear whether Hariri will be a candidate for premiership.

Reduced to a caretaker role, Hariri visited Ankara on Friday to seek support from the Turkish prime minister.

While the Shiite Hezbollah movement are backed by Iran and Syria, Hariri's followers are mostly Sunnis and he has backing from Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Turkey, like other nearby countries, fears instability in Lebanon could have consequences in the Middle East region.

Climax

The crisis in Lebanon is the climax of long-simmering tensions over the tribunal.

The tribunal is widely expected to indict members of Hezbollah soon, which many fear could rekindle violence in the tiny nation plagued for decades by war and civil unrest.

Hezbollah denounces the Netherlands-based tribunal as a conspiracy by the US and Israel and has demanded the Western-backed government of Sa'ad Hariri — the son of the slain leader - reject the court's findings even before they come out.

But Hariri has refused to break cooperation with the tribunal, prompting Hezbollah to topple his government on Wednesday. He is now heading the government as a caretaker prime minister.

According to Lebanon's constitution, the president must be a Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni and the parliament speaker a Shiite.

Daniel Bellemare, prosecutor of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) based in The Hague, is due to submit the chargesheet to pre-trial judge Daniel Fransen today, the French newspaper Le Monde reported.

Lebanon's acting Labour Minister Boutros Harb confirmed the report. "According to my information, the chargesheet will be submitted on Monday," he told AFP by telephone.

Le Monde said on its internet site that Bellemare will present his findings to Fransen at a hearing behind closed doors in The Hague, where the court is based for security reasons.

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