

Lebanon in turmoil as government collapses

Hariri cuts short visit to the US as Clinton seeks consensus on international backing for UN tribunal

- By Jumana Al Tamimi, Associate Editor
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Dubai: The Lebanese government collapsed Wednesday following the resignation of 11 opposition ministers in the cabinet.

The decision to quit came shortly after the end of a deadline given by the opposition to Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri by 4pm Lebanon time Wednesday. Hariri, who was in Washington, rejected the deadline. The new developments escalated following the failure of the Saudi-Syrian efforts to contain the tension in Lebanon over the UN-backed tribunal. The fall of the government pushes the country towards prolonged political turmoil.

The ministers tendered their resignations as Prime Minister Hariri met US President Barack Obama amid an intensified US push to support the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). The STL is expected to indict senior members of Hezbollah over the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005.

Hariri cut short his visit to the US to fly home amid the crisis, a Lebanese official in Washington said. Hariri left immediately after talks with US President Barack Obama. The official said Hariri is likely to meet President Michel Sulaiman on his return.

He added that after meeting Obama, Hariri had tele-phone conversations with French and Qatari officials, among others.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was seeking a global consensus in backing the STL. "She's already been talking to the Egyptians, the Saudis, the French and others about having an international consensus about supporting Lebanon and the tribunal," a senior US government official told reporters in Doha.

The US administration official said Hezbollah appeared intent on bringing down the government by constitutional means.

For months, Lebanon has been at a political impasse. Hezbollah has denied any involvement in the former premier's killing and urged the government to renounce the tribunal and to withdraw from it.

What next

Once the resignations are accepted, Lebanese president Michel Sulaiman will consult the various political parties to name the next prime minister. Many analysts expect Sulaiman to re-name Sa'ad Hariri to form the next cabinet. In this case, Hariri will be both "outgoing and Prime Minister-designate".

However, if the parties agree on another figure, Sulaiman will name him as designated prime minister. According to Lebanese political traditions, the prime minister should be a Sunni.

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