

## U.S. envoy: Elections should be held on time regardless of law

BEIRUT: U.S. Ambassador Maura Connelly said Monday parliamentary polls should be held on time regardless of whether politicians reach a consensus on a new electoral law.

“If a new system cannot be agreed upon in the very near term, in our view, failure to achieve consensus on a new law does not mean Parliamentary elections cannot be held on time,” Connelly told reporters after talks with Speaker Nabih Berri.

“We encourage Lebanon to hold its elections on time,” she added.

Connelly also said that Lebanon, as one of the oldest democracies in the region, should adhere to “its constitutionally-mandated election schedule as one of the requirements for free and fair elections.

“We appreciate the concerns voiced by many Lebanese that the electoral system can and should be improved. And we support efforts to reach a consensus on a new formulation that serves the fundamental Lebanese aspiration for a system that unifies the Lebanese people while respecting their various identities,” she said.

Fears the June 9 elections will be delayed have grown, after rival leaders failed to agree on a new voting system. Most politicians have ruled out holding the polls based on the modified 1960 law used in the 2009 parliamentary elections.

Connelly relayed her country’s appreciation of the efforts of Berri, President Michel Sleiman and Prime Minister Najib Mikati to adhere to the constitutional requirement to hold the polls on time.

According to Berri's office, the speaker in turn reiterated his remarks that the amended 1960 law has been buried and that the Lebanese are now faced with either the Orthodox Gathering law or a new law that guarantees sound representation and respects the Constitution.

The controversial proposal by the Orthodox Gathering was adopted by most Christian parties backed by Hezbollah and Amal Movement but met with staunch opposition from Future Movement and MP Walid Jumblatt.

"What is surprising is that everyone calls for a law according to the Constitution and no one wants to apply the Constitution," Berri was quoted as saying.

Connelly also said that her talks with the speaker also focused on the country's security situation and the crisis in Syria.

"I shared the speaker's concern about the security situation within Lebanon and along its borders," she said.

"I would like to repeat here again the United States' strong condemnation of repeated border violations made by Syrian regime forces into Lebanon, many of which result in Lebanese casualties," referring to recent shelling of Lebanese border villages by Syrian regime forces.

Regarding the ongoing violence in Syria, she also said that she briefed Berri on Secretary of State John Kerry's announcement that the U.S. will assist the military wing of the Syrian opposition with non-lethal aid.

"I briefed the Speaker on Secretary Kerry's recent announcement of U.S. non-lethal assistance to the military wing of the Syrian opposition and emphasized President Obama's commitment to helping accelerate a political transition in Syria to a democratic and inclusive post-Assad government that protects the rights of all its citizens," Connelly said.

She also stressed on the importance that all parties in Lebanon abide by the disassociation policy with regards to events in the region, particularly in Syria.

Berri's office said the meeting between the two officials also included "an emphasis on the need for dialogue between the Syrian regime and the opposition"

"There was also an emphasis on the help needed to start the dialogue and make it successful without bias, consequently, the results of the dialogue should decide Syria's future," it added.

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