

## Russia denies urging Hezbollah to withdraw from Syria

BEIRUT: Russia's ambassador to Lebanon denied in remarks published Monday that Moscow had, through its deputy foreign minister, requested Hezbollah withdraw its fighters from Syria.

"[Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail] Bogdanov did not ask Hezbollah to do that, but listened to the stances of the party's officials on this issue," Russian Ambassador Alexander Zasytkin told Al-Joumhouria daily when asked whether Bogdanov had asked Hezbollah to withdraw fighters from Syria.

Bogdanov, who wrapped up his three-day visit to Lebanon Sunday, held talks with the country's top officials, including Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah, over the situation in both Lebanon and Syria.

Zasytkin, also in remarks to An-Nahar daily Monday, said Bogdanov's meetings with Hezbollah included assessments and analysis of the situation of the resistance group in Syria, assuring that no specific demands had been discussed between the two sides.

In his remarks to Al-Joumhouria, Zasytkin also denied Moscow was seeking to boost its interests in Lebanon in order to compensate for a weakening of its influence in Syria.

"This is an inappropriate question, there is no such link whatsoever between the two issues, and such claims are not true," he said.

"We did not lose our position in Syria to try to compensate for that by strengthening our influence in Lebanon," he added.

The Russian envoy also addressed the recent reports of the possible use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime.

He told An-Nahar that such charges “should be carefully verified and the truth should be revealed and not exaggerated.”

Meanwhile, Hezbollah ruled out Monday the collapse of the Syrian regime while President Bashar Assad enjoyed the support of the resistance group.

“As long as there is the will of the resistance in Lebanon and Syria, and as long as Syria has noble friends who understand the meaning of steadfastness in the face of Israel, Syria will not collapse; and Lebanon will remain strong with its resistance and sacrificing people,” MP Mohammad Raad said.

The head of Hezbollah’s parliamentary bloc also accused Syrian rebels of trying to distract the resistance group from its primary objective: fighting Israel.

“Those attacking our people behind the border, opposite Hermel [east Lebanon], are the ones who ... are stabbing us in the back because they want to .... distract us from confronting the Israeli enemy and dealing with conspiracy plans or any attack [Israel] might think of one day.”

But Raad vowed to give Israel a hard time in the event the Jewish state committed a “foolish” attack against Lebanon.

“We have entered the era of victories and we will continue the achievements of this era,” Raad said, adding that the era of defeats had ended.

“This is why we have prepared the enemy something it cannot dream or contemplate in terms of capabilities and preparedness [of Hezbollah],” he added.

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