

Hezbollah: Lebanon should back reconciliation in Syria

By Dana Khraiche

BEIRUT: Hezbollah's Secretary General Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah urged Thursday the government to maintain its dissociation policy over the Syria crisis and at the same time to back a political solution to end the months-long conflict in Lebanon's neighbor.

The head of the resistance group also warned against politicizing the case of the growing number of Syrians fleeing to Lebanon, saying Lebanon should deal with their plight on a humanitarian basis.

"I'm not asking the Lebanese government to abandon its disassociation policy ... but to develop Lebanon's political stance to put pressure and help those who support a political reconciliation and dialogue in Syria," Nasrallah said during a televised speech.

Lebanon has adopted a policy of disassociation toward events in Syria given the deep political divisions in the country on how to approach the increasingly violent conflict in which the U.N. estimates over 60,000 people have so far been killed.

Nasrallah also praised the government, in which it is a dominant force, as well as his party on their stances toward the unrest in Syria, saying their policies had spared Lebanon from the repercussions from the 21-month-old conflict.

"It's thanks to our stance and the stance of the current Lebanese government with regard to the Syrian crisis that fighting in Syria has been prevented from spreading to us," he said.

His remarks came during a ceremony in the Bekaa Valley marking the Arbreen, the 40 days that

follow the annual Ashoura commemorations over the slaying of Imam Hussein in 680 A.D.

In his speech Nasrallah also slammed the opposition March 14 alliance, which fervently opposes Assad, accusing it of trying to draw the conflict in Syria across the border into Lebanon.

"If the other team was in government, they would have involved Lebanon in fighting inside Lebanon and in Syria," said Nasrallah, one of Assad's strongest supporters in Lebanon.

Lebanon's opposition has voiced its support for the uprising against the regime in Syria.

Turning to the growing presence of Syrian refugees in the country, which has provoked mixed responses in the country, Nasrallah insisted their case be dealt in a humanitarian manner and rejected the idea of closing the border to them.

"We should deal with the presence of Syrian refugees in a purely humanitarian manner and not politicize it," he said.

"The Syrian families should be taken care of by the Lebanese government, whether they are with the opposition or the regime or in between," he added.

"And if there are reservations on politicizing this issue then we should listen to these remarks and take them into consideration," Nasrallah added, in an apparent reference to recent complaints by Syria's ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Abdel-Karim Ali.

Ali has sent two complaints to Lebanese officials over what he describes as discrimination by the Social Affairs Ministry toward Syrian refugees in Lebanon on the basis of their political affiliations.

The ministry has denied the allegations.

Nasrallah said Thursday that a political solution in Syria would help stop the bloodshed there and open the way for refugees in Lebanon to return home.

Noting that Lebanon is the most country most vulnerable to events in Syria, Nasrallah urged the government to appeal to various states and bodies to help ease the strains on the country.

"The Lebanese Cabinet should appeal to the U.S., the Europeans, U.N., and Arab League and tell them that their approach to the Syrian crisis is only putting pressure on Lebanon that the country cannot handle at the security, social and economic levels," Nasrallah said.

The Hezbollah leader also touched on the case of the remaining nine Lebanese pilgrims being held in Syria and called on the government to negotiate directly with the kidnappers after it failed to secure their release using Turkish mediators.

“The way the government has dealt with this case is not satisfactory with all due respect to the efforts by officials ... but now is the time to directly negotiate with the kidnappers and designate a Lebanese official to do so,” he said.

Eleven Shiite Lebanese pilgrims were kidnapped in Syria's Aleppo district on May 22 last year as they were making their way back by land from a pilgrimage in Iran. One of the hostages was released in late August and another in September.

The relatives of the hostages have held a series of protest in recent days, voicing their frustration with authorities over the lack of progress in securing the release of their loved ones.

In a brief statement following Nasrallah's speech and before taking part in a Cabinet meeting, the interior minister said the government was in fact negotiating directly with the Syrian abductors.

During his speech, Nasrallah brought up the challenges that his group would face in 2013, describing the coming year as a “very dangerous phase.”

He accused Israel and the U.S. of attempting to suffocate Hezbollah politically and cut off its funding but he vowed that these efforts would be futile.

“In the coming year, we will be facing many challenges as a resistance as the Americans and Israelis are working to besiege us with efforts to place Hezbollah on the European Union's terrorist list, restricting the group's movement in Latin America and so on,” Nasrallah said.

“All these efforts will go in vain ... you will never erase our memory in history,” he added.

The Hezbollah leader, who has vowed to defend Lebanon against any possible aggression by the Jewish state, said his group was also ready to draft and put in place a strategy to protect the country's oil and gas wealth.

“We call on the state to put forward a national strategic plan and if they want to leave it up to us, we are ready [to defend Lebanon's fossil fuel resources],” he said.

“In order to protect the national oil resources, the resistance is ready to do whatever is asked of

it,” Nasrallah said, describing the potential reserves as “a national, historic opportunity to lift Lebanon” from its socioeconomic crisis.

Last year, the Hezbollah chief warned Israel against attempts to plunder Lebanon’s offshore gas and oil reserves and threatened to target Israel’s oil installations if Lebanon’s oil facilities were attacked.

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