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Lebanon's government falls



Lebanon's government fell on Friday evening after Prime Minister Najib Miqati resigned from his office, dropping a political bombshell on a country suffering a week of sectarian strife that saw intense clashes explode in Tripoli.

"Today, I announce my resignation, maybe it will be an imeptus for the political blocs to handle their responsibilities and meet each other half way to pull Lebanon out of this ordeal," he said from the Grand Serail following a day of dramatic developments.

"I have sought, as much as I could, to preserve Lebanon and keep it away from erupting volcanoes to protect the balance [in the country]," he added.

The premier called for the formation of a national-salvation government, saying, "There will be no rescue [for Lebanon] except through dialogue and making room for the formation of a salvation government in which all groups are represented."

Miqati's resignation came after the cabinet failed to approve the formation of a supervisory electoral body and did not vote on the extension of the tenure of Internal Security Forces chief Ashraf Rifi, who like Miqati is a prominent Sunni figure from Tripoli.

The PM said it was "necessary that Rifi continues to hold his position during these circumstances."

The fall of Lebanon's government follows escalating sectarian tension in the country, which first saw Sunnis in Beirut take to the streets after two Sheikhs were beaten in Shiite areas, and worsened after deadly clashes erupted overnight Thursday in Tripoli left five people dead.

The premier addressed the situation in Lebanon's troubled northern city, saying, "I address you while [Tripoli] is bleeding and bidding its martyrs goodbye. I sacrifice my soul for Tripoli."

Miqati's shock announcement brought to an end a cabinet that was created less than two years ago, after March 8 toppled former Premier Saad Hariri's national unity government. Ever since, March 14 has called for the fall of the cabinet.

Ministers failed earlier in the evening to approve the formation of a supervisory electoral body and did not vote on the extension of the tenure of Internal Security Forces chief Ashraf Rifi.

Miqati has supported the creation of the electoral supervisory committees after he had signed off with President Michel Suleiman on a decree that called for a June 9 vote for the parliamentary elections, a move rejected by the March 8 alliance, who refuse to hold a vote under the 1960 electoral law that governed the 2009 polls they lost in.

After two days of intense sectarian clashes in Tripoli receded earlier Thursday, sources told NOW that the Lebanese army reinforced its positions around former PM Omar Karami's residence in Tripoli in the event of any potential protests carried out by Rifi's supporters, who are numerous in the city.

President Michel Suleiman on Thursday submitted a bill to the cabinet to extend the retirement age of the country's senior security officers, including Rifi, who will turn 59 in April—the maximum age for the post.

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