

## Shock was needed to end deadlock: Mikati

BEIRUT: Caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati said in comments published Sunday his decision to resign was aimed at ending the political deadlock in Lebanon, while Speaker Nabih Berri urged the opposition to return to National Dialogue to discuss the formation of a government and a new elections law.

“My decision was personal and the result of deep contemplation over the interests of the country,” Mikati told An-Nahar newspaper. “More than one reason led me to my decision,” he added.

He said that in the last session of Cabinet Thursday he genuinely felt “there were no options on the horizon but more divisions instead, with the country nearing the elections and constitutional deadlines, whether on the matter of Maj. Gen. Ashraf Rifi’s retirement or the deadline for the parliamentary polls.”

“For me there needed to be a shock that could break the [political] deadlock in the hope of reshuffling the deck and pushing toward a new arrangement for the situation,” he said.

Meanwhile, Berri, who also spoke to the local newspaper, called on the March 14 coalition to return to National Dialogue, given that their demand Mikati step down has been met.

“I say to them [March 14]: My brothers, the road is [now] clear for Dialogue under the auspices of President [Michel] Sleiman.”

According to the paper, Berri expressed hope that at least one National Dialogue session be convened ahead of Sleiman’s launching of parliamentary consultations during which only two items would be addressed: the formation of a new government and the elections law.

The March 14 coalition suspended participation in National Dialogue in October 2011, months after its relaunch by Sleiman in June of the same year.

The opposition's decision came soon after the assassination of a top security official.

It accused Syria of being behind the incident and also held the government responsible for providing what it described as "political cover" for the assassination to take place.

The March 14 alliance stipulated it would only return to National Dialogue after Mikati's government resigned. It also called for the formation of a "neutral salvation cabinet" to oversee the 2013 elections.

The opposition coalition insists that only one item remains on the agenda of the National Dialogue Committee: Hezbollah's weapons, which it deems illegitimate.

Hezbollah regards its arsenal as essential for the defense of Lebanon against aggression from Israel, the group's sworn enemy.

Meanwhile, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea said the refusal of the March 8 coalition to extend Rifi's term, and in turn that of the Army commander, was the last straw that prompted Mikati to step down.

In an interview with a Saudi newspaper, Geagea said "Mikat's resignation demonstrated how he could no longer continue with the current ministerial majority given the way they are behaving."

"This majority pretended to be good with Mikati in the first year in an attempt to create a Sunni post in the face of [former] Prime Minister Saad Hariri," he added.

He argued that the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition had allowed Mikati to have his way by agreeing to fund the U.N.-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) as well as keeping Rifi and slain Brig. Gen. Wissam al-Hasan in their posts.

"The other group thought it was time for Mikati to repay them," Geagea said, noting that Hezbollah and its ally Syrian President Bashar Assad sought to deliver a blow to the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Army.

"What has been circulating is that Hezbollah was preparing Ali Hajj [to take over Rifi's post] and one of Michel Aoun's relative to lead the Army and it seems these two things represented the

last straw that broke the camel's back and forced Mikati to submit his resignation," he said.

In 2005, Hajj, a former police chief, and three other senior security officials were detained and later released by the STL, which is probing the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Geagea also said that the resignation of the government had tipped the balance of power in favor of the March 14 coalition.

"As for the domestic balance of power, I think in all cases the March 8 forces will be in a weaker position while the March 14 alliance will become stronger," he said.

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