

International

Lebanon's Hariri PM on track to become PM for third time

Hariri remains leading Sunni despite electoral losses

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Saad Al-Hariri is on track to become prime minister for a third time after winning the backing of a majority of MPs in official consultations yesterday, and is expected to launch negotiations on a coalition government. The post of prime minister is reserved for a Sunni Muslim in Lebanon's sectarian power sharing system, and the Western-backed Hariri was the clear frontrunner as the country's leading Sunni despite losing more than a third of his MPs in a May 6 election.

President Michel Aoun was holding the official consultations with MPs who were holding separate meetings with him yesterday. The meetings are due to continue into the afternoon. Aoun must designate the candidate with the greatest backing. The new coalition government is expected to reflect the enhanced political position of the Iran-backed Shiite group Hezbollah and allies that support its possession of arms, which together won at least 70 of parliament's 128 seats. While Hariri won wide backing, Hezbollah MPs named no-



Leaders have urged rapid government formation

body for the post. The group would cooperate "positively" with whoever was designated, Mohammed Raad, head of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, said after meeting Aoun.

All Lebanese leaders have called for the rapid formation of a new government that will aim to revitalize a stagnant economy situation and address unsustainable public debt levels. But like the outgoing cabinet, the new government will have to balance out the interests of all the main competing Lebanese parties and may take time. Hezbollah, which is designated a terrorist group by the United States, intends to secure three cabinet seats

in the next coalition government, an increase from the two portfolios it held in the outgoing cabinet of 30 ministers, a senior official familiar with the group's thinking told Reuters.

Hezbollah, which has to date held only marginal cabinet posts, is also seeking more significant service-providing ministries in the new cabinet, sources familiar with its thinking have said. Hezbollah also believes a cabinet post should be allocated to one of its Sunni

sources familiar with Hezbollah thinking. Any expansion of Hezbollah's role in government could pose new questions for Western policy in Lebanon. The country has been a big recipient of aid to help it cope with 1 million Syrian refugees on its soil, and its military has been armed and trained by the United States, which deems Hezbollah a terrorist group.

Analysts expect the new government to expand ties with the Hezbollah-allied Syrian government that is shunned by the West. That would further erode Lebanon's stated policy of regional neutrality that Beirut has claimed to uphold even with Hezbollah fighting in support of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. The US administration has made Hezbollah a target of its new policy to counter Iran after pulling out of the Iranian nuclear deal, a move welcomed by US allies such as Saudi Arabia that view Iran and Hezbollah as a regional threat.

While Hezbollah's arsenal has long made it the most powerful group in Lebanon, it has always limited its role in state institutions that are divided out among sectarian groups. Hezbollah has in the past foregone some of the ministries to which it was entitled and ceded them to allies, the senior official said. This election marks a break with that approach, the official said, though Hezbollah is not seeking to dominate. In the outgoing government, it held the ministries of youth and sport, and industry. A second senior source familiar with Hezbollah's thinking said the group was eyeing the ministries of public works, health, social affairs or telecoms. —Reuters



BEIRUT: Newly elected Lebanese MP Sethrida Geagea arrives at Lebanon's parliament in the capital Beirut ahead of a session to elect a new speaker, on May 23, 2018. —AFP

allies who wrested seats away from Hariri's Future Movement. The staunchly anti-Hezbollah Lebanese Forces party, which almost doubled its number of MPs to 15, is also seeking a bigger slice of cabinet portfolios. Parliament

re-elected the Hezbollah-allied Shiite politician Nabih Berri as its speaker on Wednesday, extending his tenure in the post he has held since 1992. Another Hezbollah ally, Elie Ferzli, was elected as his deputy. —Reuters

Hezbollah targets bigger role in the next government

BEIRUT: The Iran-backed Hezbollah aims to move beyond its traditional backseat role by assuming more influence in Lebanon's next government to help it counter an escalating US campaign against Tehran and its regional ascendancy. A parliamentary majority for the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah and its allies is expected to be reflected in a new coalition government that Western-backed Saad Al-Hariri will now try to form, weakened by the loss of more than a third of his MPs.

The May 6 election underlined how Lebanon's political landscape has tilted in Hezbollah's favor in recent years, and is part of a bigger picture of expanding Iranian influence that Washington wants to counter. "Hezbollah will strengthen its presence more than at any previous time," a senior Lebanese official familiar with the group's thinking told Reuters. "Now it has two ministers. It will have three - and three party members, known leaders - as clear as the sun. Shiites," the senior official said.

The group, which has to date held only marginal cabinet posts, is also seeking more significant service-providing ministries in the new cabinet, according to the official and other

Israel announces plan to approve 2,500 new homes

JERUSALEM: Israel said yesterday it will give final approval to the construction of 2,500 new homes in the occupied West Bank, the first tranche of settlements since the controversial US embassy move to Jerusalem. The announcement was slammed by the Palestinians as the result of what they called the global community's indifference to Israeli violations of international law, as prospects of a peace process between the sides appeared dim as ever.

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman announced his intention to request final approval from a planning committee for the building of 2,500 new homes in 30 West Bank settlements. "The 2,500 new units we'll approve in the planning committee next week are for immediate construction in 2018," Lieberman said in a statement, adding he would also seek the committee's approval for a further 1,400 settlement units for later construction.

"We committed to advancing construction in Judaea and Samaria and we're keeping our word," Lieberman said, using the biblical terms for the West Bank. "In the coming months we will bring forward thousands more units for approval." The 2,500 units included 400 homes in Ariel, 460 in Maale Adumim, 330 in the Etzion bloc, and a retirement home in Elkana. Israel's West Bank planning committee was set to convene on May 30 to discuss the request, though this was not officially confirmed. Israel's West Bank settlements are con-

sidered illegal under international law and are bitterly opposed by Palestinians.

'Reward for violations'

In a recent appeal to the International Criminal Court, the Palestinian foreign ministry called Israeli settlements "the single most dangerous threat to Palestinian lives and livelihoods". A senior Palestinian official slammed the Israeli announcement, which he linked to the United States' support of Israel in international forums. "This is the outcome of the US administration rewarding Israel for violating UN resolutions, and of the rest of the international community granting impunity to Israel for its systematic violations of international law," Nabil Shaath said in a statement to AFP.

Yesterday was the first major settlement announcement since the US moved its embassy to Jerusalem on May 14, a move that infuriated Palestinians and intensified protests on the Gaza border, with 60 killed in clashes with Israeli forces that day. Israel sees the entire city as its undivided capital, while the Palestinians want the eastern sector as the capital of their future state. The Palestinians have said that in light of the Trump administration decision to move the embassy, they could no longer trust the US in its traditional role of brokering a peace deal with Israel.

The US ambassador to Israel meanwhile insisted that Trump "hasn't failed on the ultimate deal," the term the US president has used to describe peace with the Palestinians. In a Wednesday interview with Israeli Channel 10 television, David Friedman said Trump was "working on the ultimate deal," with it expected to be presented to the sides "within months." While Israel would expect to retain certain settlements in any two-state peace deal, longstanding international consensus has been that their status must be negotiated. —AFP