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Hizbollah brings down Lebanon's government

The ministers walked out in protest as UN investigators are expected to indict Shiite militants for the assassination of former premier Rafiq Hariri.



Don Duncan

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BEIRUT // The Lebanese government collapsed last night after the 11 members of a Hizbollah-led opposition bloc resigned from the cabinet.

The walkout follows a protracted political stalemate over the United Nations-backed tribunal

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investigating the assassination of the former prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Mr Hariri's son, the current prime minister Saad Hariri, was meeting the US president Barack Obama at the White House when his government fell. He left Washington last night to fly to Paris for talks with the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

In a joint statement after the Hizbollah walkout, Mr Obama and Mr Hariri pledged to pursue stability in Lebanon. Hizbollah's actions "only demonstrate their own fear and determination to block the government's ability to conduct its business and advance the aspirations of all of the Lebanese people", the two leaders said.

Since rumours surfaced months ago that the UN tribunal would indict members of Hizbollah, the strength of Lebanon's government has slowly eroded. The cabinet has been paralysed, managing just a single three-hour meeting in the past two months.

"This cabinet has become a burden on the Lebanese, unable to do its work," the energy minister Gebran Bassil said as he announced the resignations, flanked by the other ministers who are stepping down. "We are giving a chance for another government to take over."

Hizbollah and its opposition allies are keen to discredit the tribunal, which they say is a US-Israeli instrument aimed at damaging them.

The tribunal is expected to hand indictments to its pre-trial judge, Daniel Fransen, as early as Monday. When Mr Fransen has reviewed the indictments, they will be made public. The Hizbollah



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leader Hassan Nasrallah has warned that the group will "cut the hands off" anyone who tries to arrest Hizbollah members named by the tribunal.

Saudi Arabia and Syria, the main patrons of Lebanon's rival political camps, have been working together since July on a peaceful compromise between the two. Few details have been made public on the substance of the initiative, but both sides had come to depend on it for an 11th-hour rescue.

Mr Bassil said the ministers decided to resign after Mr Hariri "succumbed to foreign and American pressures" and turned his back on the Syrian-Saudi efforts.

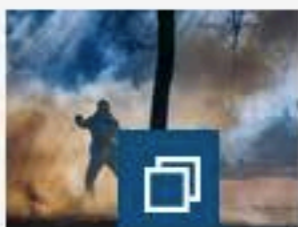
Lebanon's rival political camps have been made aware of the compromises suggested by the Saudis and Syrians, but doubt was cast over the initiative on Tuesday when Michel Aoun, the Christian leader of the Free Patriotic Movement party and a key Hizbollah ally, said "the initiative has ended without a result" and "Saad Hariri's team has not responded and we have reached a dead end".

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was in Qatar yesterday, said Hizbollah's attempt to undermine stability in Lebanon was bound to fail. "We view what happened today as a transparent effort by those forces inside Lebanon, as well as interests outside Lebanon, to subvert justice and undermine Lebanon's stability and progress," Mrs Clinton told a news conference.

Saudi Arabia insisted yesterday that a solution to the impasse had to be found within Lebanon.



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"Saudi Arabia didn't suggest any initiative but it exerted efforts to bring the viewpoints of Lebanese leaders closer," said the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Awad Assiri. "These efforts aim at encouraging Lebanese-Lebanese solutions. Only Lebanese solutions can survive," he said.

If a compromise is not reached between Lebanon's political camps by the time indictments are made public, and if the tribunal does indict Hizbollah members, the situation in the country is almost certain to worsen.

"This current crisis will peak. It has not climaxed yet," said Hilal Khashan, a professor of political science at the American University of Beirut. "The situation will not explode violently. I do not see a military takeover ... instead there will most likely be demonstrations and sit-ins."

The effects were immediately felt in Lebanon. Shortly after the Beirut Stock Exchange opened yesterday shares in the largest company on the exchange, the Hariri-owned developers Solidere, dropped about seven per cent. The escalating rhetoric prompted many companies to close shop early, sending their employees home. Televisions blared from houses and radios from passing cars as many Lebanese followed the events.

Rafiq Hariri's assassination in a suicide bombing that killed 22 other people both stunned and polarised Lebanese. He was a Sunni who was a hero to his own community and backed by many Christians who sympathised with his efforts in the last few months of his life to reduce Syrian influence in the country.

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