

Cardinal suggests U.N. intervention to help solve crisis

BEIRUT, Lebanon - A Lebanese cardinal called the militant Islamic group Hezbollah a "true problem" and suggested U.N. intervention to help solve Lebanon's political crisis.

"The state cannot bear two armies, because that leads to a proxy state in Lebanon," said Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir, patriarch of the Maronite Catholic Church, in an interview with Al-Massira, a weekly Lebanese magazine.

"The United Nations is obliged to introduce restraints if the situation remains loose. They might appoint a ruler for Lebanon," the cardinal said.

Lebanon has been without a president since Nov. 23 when Emile Lahoud's term expired. Under Lebanon's power-sharing system, the post of president is reserved for a Maronite Catholic.

In the interview, Cardinal Sfeir also warned about the possible goals of the Syrian government, noting that "Syria's return to Lebanon could be made possible through its Lebanese allies."

"Well-known political figures are likely to allow Syria to spread its control in Lebanon once again ... and Syria is known for its ability to hit back at all its enemies," he said.

Syria's 15-year occupation of Lebanon ended in 2005, but it still wields considerable political power in Lebanon.

Cardinal Sfeir also admonished politicians who are "tools of foreign powers," accusing them of attempting to "divide the nation."

"There is no president. Parliament and the government are absent ... and now they want to make the Lebanese army go through the same and become inefficient," he said.

In an apparent reference to the Hezbollah-led opposition, the cardinal said, "They say they are keen on preserving the army, but in reality they want it stripped of any powers so they can divide the country with ease."

"There are deep polarizations on the Lebanese political scene: One group aligns itself with the West, especially the United States and France, while the other works on achieving Syrian and Iranian interests in Lebanon," he said.

He also criticized foreign interference in Lebanon's internal issues, saying, "Some foreign forces might lure the Lebanese by expressing strong support to them, while others might provide them with money, weapons and authority."

The 87-year-old cardinal also denied rumors that he may resign from his post as patriarch of the Maronite Catholic Church, an Eastern rite. The cardinal has been patriarch since 1986.

At the annual Mass celebrating the Feb. 9 feast of St. Maron, a fourth-century monk whose teaching emphasized the spiritual and ascetic aspects of living, Maronite Archbishop Paul Matar of Beirut noted the absence of government officials. The Mass at Beirut's St. Maron Church is usually attended by Lebanon's president and other official government representatives.

The archbishop pointed out "the unstable image of unity among Lebanese and the failure of the community spirit that we were known for through the centuries."

"We built this country together," he said. "We remind you that the Maronites had a spiritual identity long before they built the national identity, and that goes as well for all the (religions represented among the) Lebanese."

He said the Lebanese sense of community "put in each Christian a part of Muslim, and in each Muslim a part of Christian."

"It is this sense of community that has made us a cultural bridge between people and nations. Are we willing to let this culture (of coexistence) go down the drain and to cut it off?" he asked.

"Let's call upon the Lebanese to be aware. We are all children of this country, the

same country that united us and didn't exist except by our unity," said Archbishop Matar.

He said feuding among politicians was "not part of our heritage. Let's remember that if we don't trust one another and if we don't nourish each other ... there is no guarantee, even with a temporary government."