

Clinton backs Lebanon sovereignty in Hariri talks: source

In New York meetings, Hillary Clinton discusses growing tensions in Lebanon with Sa'ad Hariri and Saudi king

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New York: US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Friday discussed growing tensions in Lebanon with the country's Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri and Saudi King Abdullah at separate meetings in New York, officials said.

Clinton reaffirmed strong US support for Lebanon's independence and for the work of the UN-backed tribunal that is investigating the 2005 assassination of Hariri's father, Rafik, a source who attended the Clinton-Hariri meeting said.

The Saudi ambassador to Washington also met Hariri and it was not excluded that the prime minister could also meet with the Saudi monarch, who is in New York recovering from back surgery, diplomats said.

Clinton first met King Abdullah. No details of the talks were given but State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said before the meeting: "Certainly, she will emphasise to the king, as well as to the prime minister, our support of the democratic government in Lebanon, as well as our ongoing support for the special tribunal."

The US Secretary of State went from the hotel where the king is staying straight to a nearby hotel next to Central Park to meet Hariri.

"Secretary Clinton expressed her strong support for the independence and sovereignty of Lebanon," a source who attended the Hariri meeting told AFP.

Clinton also "expressed very clearly her support for the Hariri tribunal." Lebanon's prime minister has said several times that he will not give into pressure from the Hezbollah to end support for the tribunal.

The secretary of state left the hotel saying her talks had been "excellent" but no other official details were given. The United States has repeatedly underlined its commitment to Hariri's government and to the tribunal.

Just after she left, the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Adel Al Jubeir, was seen going to the Hariri suite.

Saudi Arabia and Syria have been trying to mediate an end to tensions between Hariri's government and Hezbollah movement over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) investigation into the murder of the elder Hariri.

The tribunal is expected to announce indictments for the assassination within weeks and several media reports have said top Hezbollah officials will be among those charged.

Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran and Syria, has called for a boycott of the tribunal and has been pressuring Hariri to disavow the tribunal's work.

It has denied involvement in the assassination and warned that Lebanon could be plunged into a full-blown crisis should any of its members be implicated.

In an interview with the Arab daily Al Hayat, Hariri said he was travelling to New York to meet with the king for a second time in a bid to boost the Saudi-Syrian efforts to defuse the crisis.

"I am going there to discuss ways of boosting the mediation efforts that are a guarantee to Lebanon's stability," Hariri was quoted as saying.

He revealed that Saudi-Syrian mediation had led to an agreement months ago but accused the Shiite movement Hezbollah of not living up to its end of the deal.

"Any commitment on my part will not be carried out until the other party [Hezbollah] implements what they agreed to," the premier told Al Hayat.

Hezbollah and its allies have blamed the government for the deadlock in Lebanon.

"Everyone knows that the current crisis is a result of a politically motivated (UN) probe and that the party that needs to act on this issue is surely not the opposition," said parliament speaker Nabih Berri, whose Amal party is allied with Hezbollah.