

Opinion

Ray of Hope for Lebanon

The sudden deterioration of the security situation in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon has been as unsurprising as the cool spring breeze coming off the Mediterranean at this time of year.

With both major parties locked into a stalemated political confrontation for the past year and a half, escalation was anticipated after both sides suddenly raised the heat in the past two weeks.

A political contest of existential proportions transformed into street clashes after a series of separate incidents, including Hizbullah's detention of a French national, Walid Jumblatt's strong accusations against Hizbullah, and the government's decision to clamp down on the Hizbullah telephone system and the Beirut airport security hierarchy.

The union movement's general strike Wednesday provided the opportunity to expand a legitimate cost-of-living issue into a totally incomprehensible political battle on the streets.

Thursday saw the two main leaders--Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and MP Saad Hariri--speak out about the issues, and it was not surprising that both followed similar scripts.

They declared their allegiance to Lebanon's security and sovereignty above all else, insulted each other with gusto and occasional venom--in both cases suggesting that the other was Israeli-like in his actions--and then offering terms for a political deal.

The last act is the most important, because it touches on core issues at play here: The unity of Lebanon, avoiding sectarian and civil war, resolving the issues of the presidency and a national unity government, and addressing the contested government decision on airport security and the Hizbullah telecommunications system.

A careful analysis of what Nasrallah and Hariri both said suggests that they are speaking the same language that has always defined Lebanese politics and politicians: Act tough, show that you are a real man who is prepared to fight, and then offer a deal in which nobody loses face, manhood, or their privileged access to shared incumbency and the assets of statehood.

Hariri's specific offer in reply to Nasrallah's suggestions seems reasonable, and in line with what Nasrallah said: we can find a solution to this problem.

The points each man made--basically to review the government's two controversial decisions and immediately restart the national dialogue--indicate a middle ground where the concerns of all parties can be taken into account. The fact that all agree on General Michael Suleiman as the next president is also a good sign.

The question is not whether these and other political leaders in Lebanon will ultimately agree on a comprehensive compromise that they can live with. That is as certain as the breeze.

The unknown factor is only about how much more suffering, death and political mediocrity all Lebanon must suffer before the politicians actually make the compromises.

Their commitment to the discipline of a purposeful and practical national dialogue remains unclear. Both major camps engaged in a fruitless dialogue two years ago, and there are few signs that they would do any better now.

Lebanon is a tortured and vulnerable land with mediocre leaders when it comes to consensus and stable, sensible governance.

The two positions outlined Thursday offer a ray of hope. All Lebanese, meanwhile, hope that some responsible adult leaders might step forth now and act on that opening.

Daily Star

19 Die in Turkey-PKK Clashes

At least 19 Kurdish rebels and six soldiers were killed overnight in clashes and a bombing raid in southeastern Turkey, the Turkish military said Saturday. It also reported disarray within the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) after Turkish air strikes on its positions in neighboring northern Iraq last week, with several leaders allegedly abandoning their mountain hideouts and many militants fleeing their camps, AFP reported.

In the latest episode of violence, the rebels attacked a military outpost in the province of Hakkari, which borders Iraq and Iran, late Friday, killing two soldiers, the army said in a statement posted on its website.

Turkish warplanes bombed the area in response, killing at least 19 militants, it said, adding in a second statement that another four soldiers died in ensuing clashes as the army pursued the rebels on the ground.

The attack on the military outpost was carried out "to change the atmosphere of panic" among PKK ranks that followed Turkish air raids on rebel positions in northern Iraq last week that "dealt the terrorist organization a serious blow," it said.

Egypt Opens Border to Gazans

Egypt began allowing hundreds of Palestinians to cross from the besieged Gaza Strip on Saturday for advanced medical treatment, AFP reported.

"We began to transport patients requiring treatment abroad into Egypt via the Rafah crossing after our Egyptian brothers opened the crossing," said the director of Gaza emergency services, Muawiya Hassanein.

"We will transport 550 patients in 40 Palestinian ambulances and five trucks. All of them have official medical referrals from the health ministry," he added.

The patients include 200 people wounded in

Israeli military operations and 70 children under the age of 16, he said.

Meanwhile, Three Palestinians were killed and four injured on Friday during two Israeli air raids on the Gaza Strip, according to Palestinian doctors and Hamas.

The first raid, which killed two Palestinians near Rafah at the southern end of the strip, was aimed at a police station occupied by Hamas, the Islamist movement which took power of Gaza in June 2007.

The second attack targeted another Hamas police base in the town of Khan Yunis in the centre of the territory and killed one Palestinian,

the same sources said, without specifying if the victims had been Hamas members.

In another development, the Israeli army says a rocket fired from Gaza fell next to a Jewish seminary in southern Israel and damaged the building, AP said.

No one was hurt in Saturday's rocket strike in the border town of Sderot. The army says a second rocket fell in the courtyard of Sapir College in Sderot.



Pakistan, Taliban Declare Ceasefire



Pakistani army troops carry their weapons as they board a helicopter during military operations against pro-Taliban militants in Swat.

Pakistani authorities and pro-Taliban militants declared a ceasefire Friday in the volatile Swat Valley in the latest bid to curtail an explosion of violence along the Afghan border, officials said.

The ceasefire followed talks between representatives of the North West Frontier Province government and militant leader Maulana Fazlullah whose armed followers grabbed control of much of the valley last year, AP said.

Pakistan's army responded with a military operation that banished militants to the mountains and left scores dead. It was a sign of the instability in Pakistan's northwestern frontier regions where Islamic militants have challenged the government's authority.

Pakistan's civilian administration, elected in February, is seeking dialogue with Taliban sympathizers, a break from the more aggressive policy of US-backed President Pervez Musharraf, who has mostly sought to tame extremists through military force.

"After hours of talks, we have reached a cease-fire in entire Swat valley," said Wajid Ali Khan, a provincial minister after the talks held in the northwestern town of Chakdara.

He said that more negotiations would follow to bring "peace and stability" in the province.

Muslim Abdur Rasheed, an aide to Fazlullah, confirmed the cease-fire would take effect on Saturday. He described Friday's first round of talks as a "confidence-building initiative."

He said the two sides have yet to discuss the militants' demands, which include the imposition of Islamic law in the valley, the withdrawal of the army, release of detainees and compensation for damage suffered by local

people in the military operation.

Neither Rasheed nor Khan would say when the next round of talks would be held.

The cease-fire is the latest sign that Pakistan's new national government, led by the party of assassinated Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, wants to use dialogue and development to curb militancy across the border region. The North West Frontier Province's government, which is led by a Pashtun nationalist party, has joined the effort.

> Chance to Build Up

Musharraf also tried striking truces with some groups--deals that US officials complained gave Pakistani militants as well as Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters a chance to build up strength.

Last month, Pakistan freed Fazlullah's father-in-law, Sufi Muhammad, from six years in custody in return for an agreement from his group to renounce violence.

Muhammad had sent thousands to battle the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. His group--Tehrik Nifaz-e-Sharia Mohammed, or the Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law--resurfaced under Fazlullah's leadership after his arrest in 2002, but Fazlullah has previously made clear he is not bound by the deal struck by Muhammad.

Fazlullah won a large following with fire-brand preaching over an illegal FM radio station but alienated others by turning to violence, including suicide bombings in a once-tranquil region.

He had tapped into popular frustration over official corruption and failings in the justice

system. His group wants a Taliban-like system, including compulsory beards for men, mandatory veils for women and the outlawing of music and television.

Since Pakistan's new civilian government took power from Musharraf's military regime, militant attacks have subsided somewhat, although there have been isolated bouts of violence.

On Thursday, suspected Islamic insurgents killed a soldier and wounded another near a checkpoint in Kabbal, a town in the Swat Valley. Also this week, militants set fire to two girls' schools in the valley.

The Swat Valley was once a leading tourist destination in Pakistan because of its mountains and riverine scenery.

> US Reaction

Meanwhile, Washington is concerned by the new Pakistani government's negotiations with the Taliban, Eurasianet reported.

US opposition to the peace talks with insurgents is rooted in bad previous experiences. Pakistan concluded various accords in 2004, 2005, and 2006 with the Taliban in the Waziristan region on the Afghan border. But American, NATO, and Afghan officials blame these agreements for the strengthening of the Taliban and the undermining of peace and security in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Such apprehension perhaps prompted US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte to categorically reject any new peace agreements with the militants that might result in strengthening their hold on certain remote regions of the borderlands.