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LEBANON

Ministers trade blame over oil committee delay

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BEIRUT: A Cabinet session was marred Wednesday by a long-running dispute among ministers over the formation of a committee to administer the oil sector amid mounting calls for Lebanon to begin exploration of its offshore oil and gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Cabinet, which met under Prime Minister Najib Mikati at the Grand Serail, was supposed to discuss the demarcation of Lebanon's maritime boundaries in line with a report prepared by the Foreign Ministry's maritime demarcation committee. But the Cabinet shelved discussion of the issue because Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour was absent, attending the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Iran.

The report recommends that the Cabinet establish a team to propose a new Exclusive Economic Zone for Lebanon, which would bypass current boundary disputes with Israel and Cyprus and move ahead with oil and gas exploration in the country's waters.

Dispute broke out Wednesday both in and outside the Cabinet session with Health Minister Ali Hasan Khalil and Energy Minister Gebran Bassil trading blame for the delay in forming the board for the proposed oil committee.

Speaker Nabih Berri also entered the fray, demanding that the government accelerate efforts to start exploration of natural gas and oil deposits in Lebanon's territorial waters, saying this issue would have an "important and influential factor" on the country's economic situation.

Berri, who has criticized the government for being slow in dealing with the issue of Lebanon's offshore oil and gas, strongly denied media reports that a dispute between his Amal Movement and Hezbollah over naming a Shiite candidate was behind the delay in the formation of the oil committee.

"Such reports are entirely untrue. I can confirm that we [Amal and Hezbollah] are in agreement on this issue and on the name [of a Shiite candidate] too," he said during his weekly meeting with lawmakers at his residence in Ain al-Tineh.

Berri stressed "the need to act quickly in finalizing this vital issue and complete the necessary steps to begin the executive stage of oil and gas exploration ... Israel has taken speedy steps to benefit from this vital wealth while we are still dealing with this issue by [wasting] more time," he said.

Khalil, the health minister and who belongs to Berri's parliamentary bloc, also denied reports of an Amal-Hezbollah rift over a Shiite candidate to the oil committee.

"We are committed to the mechanism of appointments whose results led to a set of candidates ... We are in agreement [with Hezbollah] even on names [of candidates]. Therefore, no one must throw the ball into our court," Khalil told reporters.

Khalil reiterated his position during the Cabinet session. Taking a direct swipe at Bassil, he said after the meeting: "There is no dispute over names [of candidates]. Responsibility falls on the one who must bring up the issue in the Cabinet. The names of three [candidates] have been proposed and there is no dispute on them between us and Hezbollah."

For his part, Bassil acknowledged differences within the Cabinet over proposed names of candidates to the oil committee. "We are still searching for a consensus inside the Cabinet on names in order to propose the appointment of the oil committee [members]. But so far this consensus has not happened," Bassil told reporters after the meeting.

He said once a consensus on names of candidates to the oil committee has been reached, he would present those names to Mikati in order to put them on the Cabinet's agenda.

Noting that there was no link between oil exploration and the demarcation of the maritime boundaries, Bassil, who belongs to MP Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, said: "We are late in issuing a decree on the creation of the [oil] committee and also in the appointment of its members. This is part of our responsibility." Last year Parliament endorsed a draft law demarcating the country's maritime boundaries with Israel and Cyprus and, months later, Israel mapped out its own maritime boundary overlapping with Lebanon's.

At stake is a treasure trove of natural resources that could be worth billions of dollars. In 2010, the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that the Levantine Basin in the eastern Mediterranean, which includes the territorial waters of Lebanon, Israel, Syria and Cyprus, could hold as much as 1.7 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 34.5 trillion cubic meters of gas.

Meanwhile, Mikati said his government would take necessary measures to crack down on people blamed for a wave of kidnappings targeting Syrian, Turkish and Kuwaiti nationals and gunmen involved in last week's deadly clashes between pro- and anti-Assad factions in the northern city of Tripoli that left 17 people dead and more than 120 wounded.

Referring to Tripoli, he said: "We reaffirm absolute support for the Army and security forces to control the situation and not to allow anyone to cover violations. The Lebanese judiciary has been issuing the necessary summons on these and other incidents in order to deter and arrest those who undermined security."

Mikati confirmed that Lebanon starting from Sept. 5 would take over the presidency of the Arab League ministerial meetings for six months. He praised Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming visit to Lebanon next month as "an historic visit of extraordinary significance."

The Cabinet also approved a \$700,000 grant from Norway to aid Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as an allocation of LL45 billion for substitute plantations in the Baalbek-Hermel province after security forces destroyed cannabis crops.

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