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Lebanon president urges rivals to bury divisions

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By Tom Perry

BEIRUT, Sept 16 (Reuters) - Lebanon's president called on rival leaders to unite on Tuesday at the first session of talks that will focus on one of their deepest areas of division -- the role of Hezbollah guerrillas in defending the country.

President Michel Suleiman opened a "national dialogue" at the presidential palace by calling for reconciliation among the politicians whose power struggle pushed Lebanon to the brink of civil war in May.

"The alternatives ... call for grave concern and fear for the future," Suleiman, the former army commander, told 14 Lebanese politicians, including senior Hezbollah official Mohammed Raad, at the opening session.

The talks were agreed as part of a Qatari-mediated deal that defused 18 months of conflict between an anti-Syrian parliamentary majority alliance and a Damascus-backed coalition led by the military and political movement Hezbollah.

"We must be unified," said Suleiman, whose election was secured as part of the Doha agreement.

Demands for the disarmament of the Iran-backed Hezbollah, a group with broad support among Lebanese Shi'ites, have been at the heart of more than three years of turbulence in Lebanon following the 2005 assassination of statesman Rafik al-Hariri.

Hezbollah's armoury became an even more divisive issue in May when the group and its allies briefly took control of the predominantly Muslim half of Beirut, sparking fighting with followers of rival leaders and aggravating sectarian tensions.

The rival alliances now share power in a national unity government formed in July as part of the Doha agreement.

Some of the rivals have made reconciliation efforts, aiming to cool tensions ahead of 2009 parliamentary elections.

But Saad al-Hariri, political heir of Rafik al-Hariri and Lebanon's dominant Sunni leader, has yet to mend relations with Hezbollah. Hariri said on Monday he did not expect immediate results from the talks, which are expected to focus on a "national defence strategy".

"OVERPOWERING THE STATE"

"We do not want to table the subject of weapons for it to be cause for new sparks of strife," Hariri, whose followers were routed by Hezbollah in May, said on Monday.

"But at the same time we are looking for a responsible dialogue which draws definitive boundaries for the use of weapons and not to make them, as they are at present, a means of overpowering the state and other political groups," he said.

Hariri, a billionaire businessman, has consistently denied allegations that he had sought to build his own militia.

Hezbollah, listed as a terrorist group by the United States, says it needs its weapons to defend Lebanon from Israel. The group, which has thousands of highly trained fighters, stood its ground in a 34-day war with the Jewish state in 2006.

By far the most powerful faction in Lebanon, Hezbollah is not expected to give ground to opponents who want its military might to be brought under state control.

But it has expressed a willingness to discuss a defence strategy that would define the role of its guerrillas, who outgun the Lebanese army and are armed with thousands of missiles that can hit Israel.

"We are totally confident that we can put in place a strategy which protects Lebanon, is based on our armed forces and benefits from the capacities of the resistance," said Suleiman, who has good ties with Hezbollah.
(Additional reporting by Beirut bureau; editing by Robert Hart)

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