

INTERNATIONAL



Hussein Malla/The Associated Press

Journalists in Beirut held up black pens in protest Friday at the assassination of the anti-Syrian writer Samir Kassir.

Pressure grows on Lebanon chief

From news reports

BEIRUT: Lebanon's opposition urged pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud to resign Friday, a day after the murder of an anti-Syrian journalist, bitterly pinning the blame for the crime on Damascus and its allies in Beirut.

The killing of Samir Kassir in a car bombing revived anger with the regime that was unleashed by the February assassination of the former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Raising black pens printed with Kassir's name, hundreds of grieving journalists stood in silence on Friday in Martyrs' Square in downtown Beirut to protest his assassination.

A Christian Palestinian who held Lebanese and French nationality, Kassir regularly wrote strong articles against the Syrian government and maintained close links with the Syrian opposition.

The United Nations is investigating Hariri's assassination, which was blamed on the Lebanese and Syrian security services and pushed Syria to end its 29-year military presence in Lebanon in April.

Brushing off calls for his departure, Lahoud on Friday received the head of the UN team looking into Hariri's killing, the German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, and asked that the investigation be extended to include Kassir's killing.

But diplomatic sources said such a measure was not possible, unless Leba-

Opposition demands Lahoud step aside

non presented an official request to the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, who would then submit it to the Security Council for approval.

On Friday, an opposition member of Parliament, Nassib Lahoud, said, "The responsibility falls on this security regime headed by Emile Lahoud, and we have asked for his resignation, as our battle is not over yet and it is a decisive battle."

An editorial in An Nahar, a newspaper that carried Kassir's column, said:

"It is true that some of the security chiefs have been removed after the assassination of Rafik Hariri, but its apparatus has not been dismantled. And the head of this regime remains in the presidency after his term in office was extended against the will of the people and unconstitutionally."

After a meeting late Thursday, the opposition "demanded by democratic means the resignation of the president as he is the effective leader of the security/intelligence regime."

"Once again the hand of terrorism, under the protection of the president and the joint Lebanese-Syrian intelligence agencies, and what is left of the regime, targets a symbol of the free

press," said an opposition statement.

But the united opposition that succeeded in rallying huge protests after Hariri's assassination has suffered breaches in its ranks because of electoral difference, mainly with the retired general Michel Aoun, who last month returned from 15 years of exile.

Crucial legislative polls that started in Beirut last weekend are to be held over the next three Sundays to elect a new Parliament, where the opposition is expected to win a majority of seats and to start procedures to remove Lahoud.

Thursday's opposition meeting was attended by Hariri's son, Saad Hariri, the influential Druze member of Parliament, Walid Jumblatt, leading Christian figures and Aoun representative and son-in-law Jibril Bassil.

But Bassil walked out before the end of the meeting to protest what he called "the exploitation of the crime for political ends" in demanding Lahoud's resignation.

The opposition leader, Elias Atallah, then accused Aoun of breaking opposition ranks by "forging alliances with the symbols of the agonizing pro-Syrian regime" in political negotiations for the ongoing legislative elections.

Voters go to the polls in south Lebanon on Sunday in the second phase of the parliamentary elections.

(AFP, Reuters)