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Subject: Arab League chief says Syria trip was for 'reform' (Reuters)

CAIRO (Reuters) - Arab League head Nabil Elaraby said on Tuesday he has visited Syria to discuss the "necessity of reform", but declined to give details of a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad, whose forces have used force to try to crush months of protests.

Elaraby met Assad as part of a regional tour last week and was quoted by media as saying the League did not accept "outside interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries", even as diplomatic pressure mounts on Damascus.

The League has kept a low profile in discussing the Syrian protests and Elaraby's predecessor only voiced "worry", signalling division in the 22-member body over how to proceed.

"I met with President Bashar al-Assad ... I spoke to him about the necessity of reform and I received a promise from him that he will work on that," Elaraby, named as the League's new Secretary General in May, said at its Cairo-based headquarters.

"This is all I will say and I cannot clarify more on that."

Diplomatic pressure mounted on Assad on Monday after Qatar, previously a supporter, shut its embassy in Damascus and the European Union said it was considering tougher sanctions.

Assad has described the uprising as a foreign conspiracy to sow sectarian strife. His troops and security forces have killed over 1,400 civilians and arrested more than 12,000, according to rights groups.

Analysts say the Arab League's reticence may be a reflection of fears of what the Middle East may look like without Bashar, whose family has ruled Syria for 41 years.

'INSIDE CLOSED ROOMS'

"I found that, given the changing conditions in the region, I should start with a tour to know the leaders and their visions for what the Arab League could do in current conditions," said Elaraby, previously Egypt's foreign minister.

"I have been careful to emphasise the importance of listening and fulfilling the demands of the Arab peoples," he added, but declined to say what he was seeking to do in Syria.

That reserve contrasts with the role the League played in paving the way for NATO military strikes on Libya when it asked the U.N. Security Council to impose a no-fly zone to protect civilians in a rebellion against Muammar Gaddafi.

"On Syria ... it has to be clear that the Arab League ... is a diplomatic institution," he said. "Not all that is being said inside closed rooms could be discussed with the media."

The Arab League plans to ask the United Nations to upgrade the Palestinians to full member status.

Elaraby defended the plan, which has gained momentum with the lack of progress in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

"The Palestinian people are the only people unable to determine their destiny," he said. "This is like a declaration from Palestine and the Arab states that they want an end to this dispute."

Elaraby reiterated the League's calls for a political solution to Libya's civil war.

"As the head of the Arab League, I welcome and I am ready to go and meet any leader ... or any other group part of a struggle whether in Libya or Yemen or anywhere else," Elaraby said.

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