

Brazil won't extradite Lebanese banker

The Miami Herald
Oct. 12, 2007

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil --

Brazil's Supreme Court denied a Lebanese request to extradite a fugitive banker accused of a multimillion-dollar bank fraud and wanted for questioning in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Victor Mauad, attorney for Rana Koleilat, said Friday his client is waiting for her passport to be returned and that she had been given eight days to leave the country once it is.

"She doesn't know where she will go yet, probably some country in Europe," Mauad said in a telephone interview, adding his client has both British and Lebanese citizenship. "She's looking for a safe place. She's worried for her life."

Koleilat was jailed on fraud charges in Lebanon in 2004, but fled the country. She was arrested in Sao Paulo on March 12, 2006, for allegedly trying to bribe police officers who located her for Interpol. Police said at the time she offered a US\$200,000 (euro140,000) bribe for her freedom.

Mauad said she had been acquitted of the Brazilian bribery charges and was released from jail Wednesday. He declined to say where she was staying because she fears for her safety.

In April, a United Nations panel investigating Hariri's assassination interrogated her for about five hours at federal police headquarters in Sao Paulo, but police did not release information about the interrogation.

The U.N. commission is investigating what Koleilat knows about February 2005 truck bombing that killed Hariri and 22 others and whether money that disappeared from the Al-Madina Bank where she worked was used to finance the attack in Beirut.

Koleilat has said she knows nothing about the missing money or the assassination.

A statement posted on the court's Web site said the unanimous decision was based on the lack of extradition treaty between Brazil and Lebanon. There was no one at the court Friday to comment on the decision because of a national holiday.

An initial U.N. investigation into Hariri's assassination implicated the Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services. Syria denied involvement, but four pro-Syrian Lebanese generals were charged and are in custody. Hariri was seen as an opponent of Syrian influence in Lebanon.

Koleilat became the celebrity center of a scandal in July 2003 when Lebanon's Central Bank detected a cash deficit of more than US\$300 million (euro265 million) and took control of Al-Madina.

She had reportedly handed out expensive cars, apartments and houses to powerful people in Lebanon and in Syria. Her influence even spread to jail in Lebanon, where she reportedly had her cell painted and refurbished and ordered takeout food.