BEIRUT, Lebanon - Sfeir denounces arbitrariness in judicial procedures

Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfeir denounced the arbitrary opening and closing of judicial cases while keeping people in the dark about them, when they are paying the price for those violations and transgressions.

Speaking during Sunday mass in Bikirki, Sfeir said: "Cases are opened and closed, and nobody knows how they are opened and why they were closed ... and people are ignorant of what happens around them, and they eventually pay the price ..."

The patriarch said that such a situation makes the country gradually "lose its credibility in the world" while officials "are busy piling up their wealth and expanding their spheres of financial influence."

Sfeir accused officials of failing to reduce people's sufferings and said that they should be working to create new job opportunities and improve the country's living standards.

Prime Minister Rafik Hariri is expected Monday to inaugurate in Beirut the country's first Lebanese Islamic bank, the Arab Finance House, a joint venture among Gulf investors with an initial capitalization of $60 million.

The Central Bank gave the Arab Finance House licenses last year to set up two banks: the Arab Financial House for Commerce and the Arab Finance House for Investment. Investors plan to raise the capital of the Arab Finance House to $100 million.

The Arab Finance House is a joint venture grouping the Qatar Islamic Bank, the Gulf Finance House of Bahrain and Ousoul (Assets) of Kuwait, in addition to other Gulf investors.

Adnan Qassar, president of the Beirut Chamber of Commerce and chairman of Lebanon's Fransabank, is also a shareholder in this new Islamic bank.

The Arab Finance House group plans to open two other banks this year, one in London and another in Washington.

Abey residents formed two committees Sunday that will work toward returning the town's displaced to their homes. The committees' formation was ordered by Ministry for the Displaced Abdullah Farhat.

Residents met at Notre-Dame des Anges Church in Badaro to discuss the phases of reconciliation and return to the Abey town. Reconciliation is part of the process of returning the displaced for villages in which sectarian massacres took place during the war. The first committee includes representatives of the displaced, while the second committee is made up of representatives of the Druze living in Abey.

The head of the committee of returnees, Antoine Boustany, said the first step was to find out what the major obstacles would be in the process of achieving reconciliation and to discuss what was necessary to realize the return of previous residents.

Boustany said the claims of the displaced would be submitted to the ministry, which would examine each case individually. He said a survey of property, damages and compensation packages would be conducted later and submitted to the ministry.

The Army Command announced that almost half a million square meters of land was cleared of mines planted during the Israeli occupation of the South in the second half of 2003 and more than 8,000 items of unexploded ordnance and objects suspected of being ordinance were removed.

A joint statement released Saturday by Operation Emirates Solidarity, the National Demining Office, UNIFIL's Ukrainian battalion, NGOs and a US special team said they had cleared 346,000 square meters of landmines, while the army and engineers from the Syrian Army cleared 113,700 square meters.

The statement said the army would continue to hold awareness campaigns, and that it has completed the campaign in the areas of Baabda, Chouf and Aley. The second phase, which includes Jbeil, Metn and Batroun has started, it added.

The statement warned people, especially in the South and western Bekaa, not to approach any suspicious object and to inform the nearest military post.

The follow-up committee for teachers on contract with vocational and public schools announced it would stage a one-day strike Wednesday to protest the government's failure to pay teachers' wages for the 2002-03 school year.

After a meeting at the UNESCO Palace on Sunday, the committee urged the country's three top leaders and Education Minister and chairman of Parliament's education committee, Samir Jisr, to speed up the payment of the wages of 14 vocational schools and institutes.

The committee called for a comprehensive, fair and clear budget for vocational schools to be drawn up, and for the draft law on tenure teachers on contract in the staff of the Directorate of Vocational and Technical Education to be carefully examined.

Von: Daily Star, 12 January 2004

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