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Wednesday, August 08, 2007

Civil-society campaign urges leaders to stop bickering

By John Ehab

Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A group of civil society networks announced on Tuesday an "emergency campaign" called "Khalas" or Enough aiming at urging bickering Lebanese politicians to solve their problems and resume national talks. The campaign, which was announced two days after by-elections in Metn and Beirut further deepened the political divide among the Lebanese, will urge politicians to work to prevent the formation of parallel governments should Parliament fail to convene to elect a new president on September 25.

"The idea is basically to emphasize the role civil society can play besides the politicians in the current political situation," Kamel Mhanneh, one of the campaign founders told The Daily Star.

Mhanneh, who represented the Lebanese civil society in Paris talks last month, added: "We were very clear in our call today, that if the Constitution is surpassed it will soon end up with two presidents and two cabinets." Civil society has to find a peaceful solution for the crisis, he added.

In his visit to Lebanon last month, France's Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner praised the campaign, which he said "will reveal the moods of the Lebanese community."

Kouchner said the campaigners will highlight the importance of Lebanon's mosaic society and will raise their voice that says "we can live together."

Khalass will also organize events and protests to raise awareness against the danger of failing to elect a president before November 23, when President Emile Lahoud's term ends.

"We wanted to gather around a unified slogan that says 'we are sliding toward vacuum and chaos,'" said Nayla Geagea, a civil activist.

Geagea had in the past coordinated for Ouwa or watch-out/wake up, a gathering of 12 NGOs that also protested against the current political crisis.

However a meeting which was called to urge politicians to solve their problems, stumbled upon a few problems itself as many participants strayed away from the main topics.

"How would we proceed if we discuss such ridiculous details [amid] the current situation?" asked Rana al-Haj, a representative from the Social Movement, referring to topics like how women should be represented in the events of the campaign.

"It's a normal situation, civil society is people, and people have different opinions," said Ziyad Baroud, a lawyer and a co-founder of the campaign.

Others objected to adopting the Taif Accord - the agreement that ended Lebanon's Civil War - as the base for the campaign.

"The mess occurred because the meeting included groups from different orientations," added Baroud. Later meetings will take place in smaller groups, Baroud said, adding that the meeting still achieved its primary goal of launching the initiative.

The campaign also drafted a petition called "political responsibility pact" that will be signed 1 million Lebanese. The pact's statement denounced violence, sectarian strife and using media for defaming opponent political groups.

Ouwa, Resolve it Solve it and Bkafi (which also means Enough) are other gatherings that recently protested against Lebanese political deadlock and denounced sectarian violence.

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