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Lebanese President welcomes Amnesty International office in Beirut

The Lebanese authorities have given the go-ahead to set up a regional office for Amnesty International in Beirut.

“We are delighted at the support and encouragement we have received for the proposal from the highest authorities in Lebanon, from human rights activists and from various representatives of civil society,” said June Ray, the Middle East Program Director of Amnesty International who has just returned from Lebanon.

During a one-week visit to the country -- between 22 and 28 November -- Amnesty International delegates, led by June Ray, held talks with Prime Minister Salim el-Hoss, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Michel el-Murr, and Education Minister Mohamed Youssef Beidun. All officials expressed their support for the office proposal and gave assurances that the government would expedite the procedural arrangements for the office preparations to get underway.

The office, planned for 2000, will focus initially on programs for human rights education and awareness, and providing training in various fields. Consultations have begun with officials in the Ministry of Education and UNESCO as well as with non-governmental organizations.

Amnesty International delegates visited the Presidential Palace in Ba'abda at the end of their visit on Saturday 27 November, where officials conveyed a personal message from President Emile Lahoud, affirming his commitment to building a state based on the rule of law, “*which can only be maintained by giving due regard to international human rights standards and agreements*”. The President expressed his full support for Amnesty International's plans for a regional office.

Prime Minister el-Hoss told Amnesty International delegates that Lebanon needed more human rights education programs and welcomed Amnesty International's proposed contribution in this field.

Amnesty International's talks with government officials also included outstanding human rights concerns in Lebanon and proposals to bring law and practice in Lebanon into greater conformity with international human rights standards. Amnesty International welcomed Lebanon's willingness to ratify the UN Convention Against Torture and expressed the hope that this would be realized at the earliest opportunity.

Delegates also discussed the cases of Lebanese detainees held in Khiam by the South Lebanon Army and Israel in occupied southern Lebanon, and hostages held in Israel. They also raised cases of Lebanese detainees and “disappeared” in Syria.

Between 24 and 26 November, Amnesty International also co-organized a seminar on “Making Women’s Rights a Reality”-- together with the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World -- at the Lebanese-American University. This brought together experts and representatives of women’s and human rights non-governmental organization and students, who agreed a proposal and set of practical recommendations to address the following areas:

family crimes (commonly referred to as “crimes of honour”;
optional civil marriage;
Lebanese Labour Law and Women; and
Women in Lebanese Prisons

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