

## **Aoun wants peaceful rally alongside Wednesday strike**

*Gemayel declares dialogue dead, does not expect presidential vote*

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BEIRUT: Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader MP Michel Aoun called on his supporters to take part in demonstrations on Wednesday in a bid to increase pressure on the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to resign. The General Labor Confederation (GLC) is staging a general strike on Wednesday to protest government policies and demand an increase in wages.

Aoun distinguished between demonstrating and rioting.

"While rioting is forbidden, every citizen enjoys the right to demonstrate peacefully in order to achieve national demands," he said.

Aoun called on all workers and employees to demonstrate on May 7, blaming the government for the country's political and economic crises.

Speaking to reporters after a meeting of his Reform and Change parliamentary bloc, Aoun said that calling for the immediate electing of a new president without agreeing on a new electoral law for the 2009 parliamentary elections was against the interest of Lebanon's Christian community.

Aoun accused the parliamentary majority of not wanting to draft a new electoral law.

"They don't want to discuss the electoral law with us because they prefer to stage the next elections under the 2000 electoral law," Aoun said.

The FPM leader also warned the parliamentary majority against electing a new president with a simple majority quorum.

"Such a move is equivalent to a coup and will definitely be faced by another coup," he said.

On the issue of Hizbullah's private phone network, Aoun said that Hizbullah was not the only group that had such a system, saying the opposition group was facing security threats and needed to protect itself.

Aoun also defended Hizbullah's possession of arms and said the resistance had earned a "certificate of good conduct" for its handling of its arsenal.

Aoun added that Hizbullah's alleged setting up of cameras to monitor the Beirut International Airport was not a breach of the country's security.

"Everybody has cameras. The road to Bikfaya is full of cameras and so are other areas in the country," he said, hinting that leaders of the ruling majority were also using cameras for security purposes.

The FPM leader also lashed out at An-Nahar newspaper, arguing that the daily has "lost its ethical principles and deserves not to be read anymore."

Aoun described An-Nahar as a propaganda tool of the March 14 Forces.

Meanwhile, Reform and Change bloc member MP Walid Khoury said on Monday that he was ready to elect consensus candidate and commander of Lebanese Armed Forces Michel Suleiman as president whenever he gets the chance to attend an election session.

Khoury said he trusted Suleiman and was confident of his ability to safeguard the country.

Also on Monday, Phalange party head and former President Amin Gemayel said in an interview with the Qatari daily Al-Raya that the opposition does not want to elect Suleiman.

Gemayel, who visited Qatar on Monday and met with Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani, called for Lebanon to be kept neutral and away from regional and international conflicts.

Gemayel also declared that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's call for dialogue between the rival parties has reached a dead end.

"It is not likely that a president would be elected on May 13," Gemayel said.

Parliament is scheduled to meet on May 13 to elect a new head of state after 18 earlier elections sessions were postponed, leaving the country without a president since November.

Meanwhile, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea told the Central News Agency Monday the March 14 Forces will do their best to ensure the election of a new president on May 13.

He said the parliamentary majority will not resort to electing a president with a simple majority vote before discussing the matter with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir and Suleiman, both of whom have rejected the option.

Commenting on Hizbullah's private phone network, Geagea said that the resistance had no right to take whatever security measures it finds convenient.

"The Lebanese people have not commissioned Hizbullah to decide Lebanon's defense strategy. Hizbullah is not the proper authority to ban some things and allow other things," Geagea said.