

As written

REPUBLIC OF LEBANON  
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS

**Speech of His Excellency  
The Minister of Social Affairs  
Dr. Michel Moussa  
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## **SPEECH OF HIS EXCELLENCY THE MINISTER OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS OF LEBANON**

Since its independence in 1943, Lebanon has opted for a liberal economic system with a market economy and free currency exchange. The political system is one of representative democracy where the freedoms of speech, of association and of religious beliefs are guaranteed by the Constitution. In spite of the war that raged in the country for 16 years, from 1975 to 1991, imposed by outside influences, Lebanon remains a stronghold for democracy with a liberal economic system.

Immediately after the end of the war, Lebanon embarked on one of the most spectacular reconstruction efforts. It has already rebuilt most of its physical infrastructure and is intent on pursuing a balanced economic and social development that we believe is the only way of achieving sustainable growth. In this effort, population and social concerns play a very important part. The government established in 1994 a National Population Policy Council, formed from population experts and representatives of the various concerned ministries. Its major purpose is to formulate a population policy that can be integrated in the overall development policy of the government. In parallel, the Lebanese Parliament established an ad-hoc Committee on Population and Development that aims at producing the necessary legislation for population policy.

The first task of government in this area after the war was to assess the population situation in the country through a series of statistical surveys undertaken on national basis. Thus, a National Population and Housing Survey was undertaken in 1996 by the Ministry of Social Affairs followed by a survey, undertaken by the Ministry of Public Health, on the health of mother and child (PAPCHILD). In 1997 the Central Statistical Directorate undertook a survey on Living Conditions in the country and the Ministry of Labour undertook another national survey on the labour force. These and other surveys gave the government and civil society a clear view of the population and social issues that need to be tackled in their on-going efforts in the reconstruction and development of the country.

Both fertility and mortality have declined considerably during the past couple of decades. Total fertility rates are now less than 3 children, which is lower than most developing countries. The crude death rate has fallen to less than 7 per thousand population and infant mortality is presently less than 28 per thousand births. As a result, the rate of population growth has fallen to below 1.7 per cent a year and is expected to fall to one per cent in the next 15 years or so. In other words, Lebanon is at an advanced stage of demographic transition and is approaching the situation of a developed country in terms of its demographic development.

One of the most important causes of this demographic transition has been the achievement made by the country in terms of education. Adult illiteracy rates have fallen to 15 per cent and among the younger age groups they do not exceed two to three per cent. Almost all primary school age children are in schools. Gender differences in enrollment have all but disappeared. In fact, at the intermediate and secondary levels of education, female enrollment rates are slightly higher than male rates and they are equal at the university level. This achievement is the result of a

strong partnership between the public and private sectors of education and an unshakable commitment of Lebanese parents to educate their children of both sexes.

But all this is not to say that Lebanon has become free of demographic and social problems. There are still unacceptable differences in social well being among regions in the country, and the government is expending great efforts to reduce these disparities. The Lebanese war has left behind a large number of displaced persons. The return of these persons is not an easy matter since homes have to be rebuilt and infrastructure has to be established before an effective return can take place. About 40 per cent of the displaced have already returned and the government is active in insuring the return of the rest. There is an undue concentration of the population in and around the capital city because economic activities are largely concentrated there. Decentralization of administration and of economic activities are being pursued in order to insure a better distribution of the population in the country. The Lebanese people have traditionally been an internationally mobile population and there are many more Lebanese in the various continents of the world than inside the country. We are trying to bring back those who desire to do so and establishing stronger connections with those who want to remain in the countries of destination. While overall unemployment is not very high, less than 10 per cent, unemployment among youth who are first entrants into the labour force exceeds 25 per cent. Improving labour market conditions, together with youth employment programs and the pursuit of economic development, are major priorities of the Lebanese government.

In conclusion, I should like to emphasize Lebanon's commitment to the principles of the United Nations. In this context, it has ratified practically all international conventions that came out during the past twenty years and that could not be ratified because of the war, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women. It is enacting national laws, where necessary, to conform to these conventions. Lebanon has taken the recommendations of the Conference on Population and Development of 1994 in full seriousness and is formulating its population policy in conformity with it, taking, of course, national particularities into account. But Lebanon that undertook a colossal program of reconstruction without considerable foreign assistance looks for increased interest of donors in future. I should like to thank the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Development Programme for their support that has been crucial in developing our statistical and population programs. We believe that Lebanon is not only a profitable place for commercial investments it is also an effective environment for bi-lateral and multi-lateral assistance because it has great absorption capacity given its highly developed human infrastructure. We look forward to a continued partnership between us and the international community in the pursuit of a balanced and sustainable development where population and social issues take the important place they deserve.

I conclude in pointing out that Lebanon which respects all international agreements and participates effectively in all the international meetings and proceed to the implementation of all their resolutions, still needs the influent support of all international instanties and conferences, in putting pressure pressure on Israel to execute the Resolutions that lead to a complete and fair justice in the Middle East, and especially the Resolution n. 425, requiring its , I mean Israel's, immediate and unconditional withdrawal from South Lebanon and the Bekaa, allowing the Lebanese people, to live in peace on their own territory, like all people on this earth.