

Lebanese cardinal urges mending of relationship

BEIRUT, Lebanon - Lebanon's Maronite Catholic cardinal called for the mending of Lebanese-Syrian relations "for the welfare of both countries."

"If the nature of the ties between Lebanon and Syria is not once and for all determined, this is likely to reflect negatively on both countries," said Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir, the Maronite patriarch, in his annual Lenten address.

Syria's 15-year occupation of Lebanon ended in 2005, but it still wields considerable political power in Lebanon.

Cardinal Sfeir criticized foreign intervention in Lebanon's internal affairs and Lebanese politicians "who serve as tools in the hands of foreign powers."

"Some politicians ally themselves with foreign forces to serve their personal interests ... and this is the worst of behaviors," he said. He noted that political rhetoric has "sunk way too low, and this contradicts all principles of freedom."

Lebanon has been without a president since Nov. 23 when Emile Lahoud's term expired. Under Lebanon's power-sharing system, the post is reserved for a Maronite Catholic.

Feuding politicians have failed to agree on the makeup of a new government, which has prolonged the presidential vacuum. A Feb. 11 parliamentary session to elect a new head of state was likely to be scrapped, after 13 previous cancellations.

The cardinal accused Lebanese politicians of lacking "any sort of national sense" and "mixing the personal with political."

"Some politicians think about their personal interests and totally overlook the interests of their country," Cardinal Sfeir said.

He also defended the role of the Maronite Catholic patriarch in Lebanon's history, saying, "Without the patriarchs, Lebanon - with its natural borders, as we know it

today – would never have been possible.”

In a statement following its monthly meeting Feb. 6, the Maronite bishops’ council noted that in Lebanon “it looks as if people are in conflict about everything.”

“The ongoing obstruction of state institutions is damaging citizens’ rights,” the council said.

“In addition,” it said, “there have been several attempts to paralyze the army and to thwart the role of the church. This is part of the plan aimed at emptying Lebanon and driving its youth to emigrate.”