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Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil held a meeting with real estate judges, heads of Cadastre departments and companies contracted to carry out delimitation, delineation and surveying works, as well as those who are executing the delimitation and delineation works. The meeting aimed at discussing all these works and setting deadlines for the completion of the delimitation, delineation and surveying works of the concerned areas, in addition to tackling the issue of public lands.

The Director General of the General Directorate of Land Registry and Cadastre (GDLRC), Mr. George Maarawi, gave first a detailed presentation of the Cadastre as a process for developing the Land Registry. He talked about the delimitation, delineation and surveying works and the legal, administrative and executive parties concerned by such works, mainly the real estate judge for judicial affairs, along with the administrative parties represented by the representative of the Public State Properties Department, the topographer and the Mukhtar, in addition to executive parties represented by the Cadastre Division and the private sector's subcontracts. He also discussed the importance of delimitation, delineation and surveying works that will grant ownership certificates to those entitled to them and will give the estate its own identity by including it in the Land Registry System, which will activate the economy.

He mentioned the current situation, the progress made and the difficulties faced such as the important number of estates that are still not included in the Land Registry. He also mentioned the cases that have caused many disputes and which tribunals had difficulties to solve. He specified 10 immediate and practical fast measures to be taken in order to complete all the surveying works in all the regions, which represents more than one objective in the interest of the State and the public.

## Statement of H.E Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil

Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil stated that the meeting with the topographers is not a celebration but an administrative meeting to discuss the status and fate of the surveying process on the Lebanese territory. He said: "We all have to agree that the progress of this file is unsatisfactory and we are, therefore, facing a reality that needs to be reviewed and addressed by the administration, the Judiciary and by the companies carrying out the surveying."

He pointed out that this dissatisfaction is not personal or related to a certain mood; it is a matter related to the performance during the last period, in terms of time and delay, and to the results of the completed the work, in addition to a third issue which is the losses incurred by the Sate in terms of large areas of land due to problems, de facto situations and occupations. Such problems happened with the collusion of one of the parties involved in or in charge of the surveying.

He continued: "It is unacceptable to have contracts dating back 16 years, i.e. since 2002, for delimitation, delineation and surveying works that have not been completed yet according to the reports we have between our hands now. The irony in this country is that a company subcontracts, for 16 years, works that are worth 100 million Lebanese Liras, makes profits and claims that it is working in accordance with the law.

"As a citizen, I do not believe that a company gets a subcontract of less than 100 million Lebanese Liras and continues working for years with employees, without us questioning if it is doing volunteer work for the State or receiving payments from the citizen illegally, and this is a concrete fact. I would like to tell those who are assuming that this information is inaccurate that we have reviewed dozens of reports on the performance of topographers, as companies or as State employees, and these facts are undeniable. How can we work and the amount that we can collect per month is less than 8 million Lebanese Liras for field topographers who have been working for a decade, which means less than one million Lebanese Liras per month for each working team."

He continued: "I am not finger pointing, but I am stressing that we should solve this issue, not only because we want to overcome any violation but also because we want to start a new working phase where subcontracts are not made in agreement or according to a lump sum, but according to the load of work and its estimated cost, and bids. This should inhibit anyone from receiving a certain amount per transaction, stop endless discussions in villages and prevent companies and

topographers from acting as if they do not work for the State but for their own account.

This requires preventing anyone from being paid for each transaction. He stressed that some people have publically set a price, describing it as organized or public bribery for the completion of their work. He added: We want to put an end to this issue and we have accordingly subcontracted works in 5 or 6 villages and topographers are supposed to start working according to this mechanism. I assure you that if we are informed of any violation committed by subcontracted companies or any payment received from citizens in exchange for their work, we will immediately take action and first, stop the work, then refer them to the public prosecution to take necessary measures.

He continued: we are now moving toward a new phase more transparent and serious.

He continued: The second issue is the existing contracts to complete surveying works. We made decided earlier to stop these work, but more than a year ago, the surveying resumed. Therefore, there is no justification for the delay. It is true that I have signed a 6-month or one-year extension for many companies carrying out these works, but now we can no longer extend to any subcontracted company unless there is a clear report that specifies all what has been achieved and what is still pending, with the reasons behind failing to accomplish the works according to the set deadlines, in addition to suggesting the time needed for the completion of the works.

He stated: We want to put an end to this issue, Director General, Mr. George Maarrawi, has identified the 10 points that need to be implemented and I will not repeat them, but I would like to stress that we are capable of accomplishing them if we are serious and practical, without waiting for a political event or complications in the towns.

He pointed out that an important project is underway between the World Bank and the GDLRC, adding that in all the meetings, even those with international bodies interested in helping Lebanon with land management and organization, no one believes that Lebanon, despite being a small country, still has wide areas that have not been delimited or delineated yet, which is severely affecting the general economic situation. It is unacceptable to have lands that have not been surveyed yet or divided into lots, which makes it difficult to value them. Indeed, once this is done, it will help achieve many economic operations that would activate the situation in the country and put an end to the stalemate, while helping restore the economic and financial situation and increase growth.

He added: “No one should assume that our work is restricted to people who directly benefit from it. Indeed, the whole country shall benefit from it on many levels: finance, economy and development, especially that if many regions remain unchanged, no one will think about going there and making real investments. As you all know, our country has small areas, therefore we need to make the best of all its corners. Consequently, when works are properly achieved in certain areas, the latter can then play an important role then in the development process planned for the whole country.”

He stated: “I would like also to discuss the current legal proceedings between the State and the people who are violating State properties and public lands. There are currently 189 lawsuits against violations and theft of State properties in different places. Some proceedings have been completed and many are still pending and must be pursued.

He added: We are holding a special meeting next week with the Public Prosecution (Cassation and Financial) and we will set a plan of action dedicated to all complaints and real estate claims so we can really push forward this file. In order to achieve this, we need direct assistance from the heads of departments and topographers, and maybe from companies which are probably part of the problem. We also need the follow-up and assistance of real estate judges who are well informed of the details of the files related to lands and their future.”

He added: "In order to avoid repeating the abovementioned ten points on which we have to work, let me say that if there are realistic reasons for not surveying some lands, such as the presence of mines, let us make a decision to close this file and not postpone it so it remains open and the subcontract goes on while there are no real works to be done.”

He continued: “There are some very sensitive and complicated issues that need a direct cooperation between real estate departments, real estate judges and topographers in order to produce specific reports about these complicated files. In order to overcome the crisis, different types of interventions might be required, such as legislative interventions or decisions taken at the highest level or by the government, such as decrees, or even political interventions when the problems are due to political interference. We shall not keep any case pending because it is hard to solve. On the contrary, we should define and tackle it and determine what can or cannot be solved, in order to develop a road map for the entire Land situation and all matters related to delimitation, delineation and surveying works across Lebanon. Therefore, we would be able to tell what has been surveyed in each area, what still needs delimitation and delineation and what has been subcontracted with the detailed stages of the subcontract. We have funds in the Budget and we can subcontract works in 10 or 20 villages that

have not been chosen yet, so we no longer have arguments for the delay in surveying operations.”

He added: “We should set one strategic objective which is that Lebanon shall not have any region, village or town that has not been delimited, delineated or surveyed. This is possible and in case of difficulties, we can all find the needed will and determination and share the responsibility in order to accomplish it as soon as possible within a fixed deadline. The final measurement of lands should be completed in order to put an end to some problems that might occur in some villages. This is not impossible either. On the contrary, it is easier because ownerships are clearly determined, but some technical details still need to be tuned and we shall have clear, clean and documented data according to advanced and scientific standards from which we can truly benefit.

This meeting today aims at pushing the button together and we might need to hold more than one meeting or organize meetings for each region alone in order to discuss the specificities of each file. I will see with Mr. George Maarrawi how we can hold workshops for some problematic regions and I really hope real estate judges consider us one team and we are willing to do everything we can to facilitate the accomplishment of this plan and the resolution of pending issues. Judges should also assume their responsibilities and conclude the cases as per the laws.

He continued: There might be problems, incidents and people who might resort to some judicial or security “connections”, but we are concerned about the rights, life, destiny and the future of the people and their children, as well as part of their past. Therefore, we should focus on the rights of the people and I do not think that anyone here wants to mess with these rights. Some might want to mess with the rights of the State and the public lands, but we will be attentive and firm when it comes to this matter. If the reports we have before us today are accurate, we have hundreds of thousands of meters which ownerships have been illegally and illegitimately transferred from people or from the State to individuals. It is our duty to protect the rights of the State and ensure they do not lapse due to prescription like it has already happened in the past.