



Berri Urges Swift Oil Exploration Off Lebanon Shore

by Naharnet Newsdesk 29 August 2012, 07:20

Speaker Nabih Berri stressed on Wednesday the importance of swiftly completing the necessary steps to launch oil exploration off Lebanon's shore.

"This vital issue shouldn't be delayed," Berri told MPs during his weekly meeting with lawmakers.

Local newspaper said on Wednesday AMAL and Free Patriotic Movement ministers are divided over Lebanon's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Earlier, Berri said in comments published in As Safir newspaper that the cabinet's decision to tackle the EEZ is a "positive" indication that the government is serious in tackling the matter.

"Prime Minister Najib Miqati should activate the cabinet's productivity as any accomplishment regarding the oil exploration is affected by it," the speaker said.

However, FPM Energy Minister Jebran Bassil lashed out at attempts to re-discuss Lebanon's EEZ when the cabinet had previously resolved the matter.

"Re-tackling this matter sets the clock backwards, while we should make use of every minute in exploring oil off Lebanon's shore," Bassil told As Safir.

He pointed out that the delay in digging for oil is not due to the different points of view over the EEZ, but it is the result of the delay in appointing the oil authority members, which is tasked with overseeing the petroleum sector for the purpose of exploring the reserves.

"The government should prioritize the appointments of the oil regulatory authority and not re-discuss the EEZ, which was already agreed on," Bassil said.

Sources close to Prime Minister Najib Miqati said that the controversy facing the appointment of the oil regulatory authority is the name of the Shiites member.

"The government is working on resolving the dispute," the sources said.

However, Berri later denied to lawmakers the issue, saying: "We confirm that we have agreed on the name."

Lebanon and Israel are bickering over a zone that consists of about 854 square kilometers and suspected energy reserves there could generate billions of dollars.

The cabinet approved in September the proposed borders of Lebanon's EEZ in the Mediterranean.

In June, Lebanon was able to restore 530 square kilometers of a maritime zone that it considers it to be within its EEZ.

Media reports said that, the U.S. and the United Nations acknowledged Lebanon's rights to control the 530 square kilometer disputed area after prolonged diplomatic and political efforts.

Sources in the Foreign Ministry told As Safir said that Lebanon should exert efforts to restore the remaining 300 square kilometers.

Lebanon has been slow to exploit its maritime resources compared with other eastern Mediterranean countries. Israel, Cyprus and Turkey are all much more advanced in drilling for oil and gas.

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