USJ to boost campus security following fight

BEIRUT: The head of Université St. Joseph promised to double security at the campus in Monnot and consider reforms to student elections in the wake of a heated dispute last month that forced the institution's closure.

"We must consider the meaning of student union elections because the struggle among the students was greatly provocative," Salim Dakkash, USJ's president, said in a speech.

In November, several confrontations between Hezbollah and Lebanese Forces students temporarily shut down USJ's Huvelin campus in Monnot, which remains heavily guarded. The spark appears to have been graffiti of the name Habib Chartouni, the man who assassinated President-elect Bashir Gemayel, with a heart under it.

March 14 students blamed Hezbollah youth for the drawing, sparking a faceoff between a supporter of the party and a member of the Lebanese Forces. Sources later told The Daily Star that the graffiti was done by a student member of a Christian political group.

Dakkash outlined measures to prevent future such incidents at the university, including doubling the security presence at Huvelin, creating a group of mediators to defuse tensions, and even potentially opening a new campus to reduce the pressure on the university's various branches.

He also said some university officials had proposed abolishing student elections altogether.

"We are ready to begin a true and direct dialogue with the aim of redirecting the mission of the student unions," he said.

Dakkash said he did not wish to conceal the "danger of these events and their negative effects on the university." He said that although he understood Huvelin campus and the university's name were symbols to many Lebanese, the media had exaggerated the conflict, as "there were no punches or fighting."

Such clashes had been averted because university officials intervened and called on security forces at the appropriate time, he said.

He also confirmed two students had been suspended in connection with the issue. – *The Daily Star*