

Sayegh announces finalization of new draft legislation on child protection

By Van Meguerditchian
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The next government must work to uphold and add to the achievements made in defense of children's rights and representation in Lebanon, caretaker Social Affairs Minister Salim Sayegh said Thursday.

Following the collapse of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Cabinet last month, Sayegh has boosted the ministry's work pace to launch as many of his planned projects as possible.

"Legislative work requires political

determination and the allocation of the proper resources to implement the draft law [for child protection]," Sayegh told a news conference held to announce the introduction of a number of draft laws belonging to the third stage of the national social development strategy.

The move comes in the run-up to the announcement of a new Cabinet, of which Sayegh, a Kataeb (Phalange) Party official, might not be a part.

"We've had enough of postponements and delays ... I hope the new cabinet will be committed to social affairs and not to ministerial positions for the sake of power," said Sayegh.

However, Sayegh expressed concern that the draft laws would not be enacted by Parliament and the new Cabinet. "If they disregard the entire agenda we have been working on day and night, I am afraid we will go back to [square one]," he added.

More than a dozen draft laws were formulated by Saint Joseph University's Centre d'études de Droit du Monde Arabe (Center of Law Studies of the Arab World) and handed to the Higher Council for Childhood.

The draft laws proposed by the council at the conference include amending existing laws on association member-

ships and certain penal code articles.

They call for lowering the legal age requirement for joining associations from 21 to 15, and also spell out measures for strengthening the rights of disabled children and their protection by the government.

Amendments to the penal code also call for restricting the right of disciplining a child exclusively to the parents and not to teachers, and demand the introduction of clearer definitions regarding abuses, as well as stricter penalties for sexual exploitation cases.

The minister added that it was completely unacceptable that other coun-

tries in the region, such as Syria and Jordan, have surpassed Lebanon in their child protection legislation. "Syrian President Bashar Assad allocated \$10 million to child protection services and asked his government to implement them immediately," he added.

Other proposed reforms include imposing free and mandatory education for children up to the age of 15, as well as restricting the workforce to persons above that age.

Most of the draft laws call for the prosecution of a child's guardian who violates the decrees in defense of children's rights.