

Lebanon enables maritime exports to bypass Syria August 08, 2012 01:19 AM By [Mohamad El Amin](#)

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BEIRUT: Lebanon started facilitating the export of agricultural produce via maritime routes Tuesday, with a first shipment containing 200 refrigerated containers of potatoes setting out for the Gulf.

The move was announced after a meeting of a newly formed joint committee comprising officials from the Agriculture, Economy, Public Works and Transportation ministries and representatives of shipping agencies.

The participants voiced support for the use of refrigerated containers as the most viable maritime transport option, arguing against the use of roll-on-roll-off (ro-ro) ships – vessels designed to carry cargo trucks.

The use of ro-ro ships would require vessels to be fully loaded before departing to a given destination and the separate travel of truck drivers to destination ports.

Instead, container ships will leave Beirut port for various regional and international ports every 36 hours, the statement said.

Elie Zakhour, head of the Beirut International Chamber of Navigation, told The Daily Star that some administrative barriers were abolished to facilitate agricultural exports through already-existing shipping routes.

For instance, ports will now accept shipments until 6 p.m. rather than 2 p.m., and will ease procedures for filling containers with produce.

He added that the use of ro-ro ships could lower the price of exported produce as those vessels would likely take large shipments of the same produce to a destination port.

Zakhour said maritime shipment would cost on average the same amount as shipping through land routes.

Nevertheless, he added that land shipments remain more convenient and in most cases a faster option.

Shipping agencies present at the meeting said shipping charges range from \$1,500 per 27-ton container to Port Said, Egypt, and \$3,600 to Muscat, Oman. Shipments to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, would cost \$2,400 per container.

Representatives from CMA-CGM and MAERSK, two shipping companies that pledged in the meeting to facilitate produce shipments, said the price does not include transportation to Beirut Port as well as inside the destination countries.

Shipping duration ranges from one week to Port Said or Jeddah and three weeks to Aqaba, Jordan depending on which route the ships take.

Lebanese industrialists and farmers have warned that the turmoil across Syria has made exports through the neighboring country to vital Gulf Cooperation Council markets very difficult.

They repeatedly called on the government to initiate ferry lines that can transport trucks to Egypt or Jordan en route to destinations in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

The volume of agricultural exports fell 7 percent in the first half of 2012 compared to 2011, the Farmers Association said in a report issued Tuesday. The association reiterated calls for alternative export routes bypassing Syria.

According to the report, agricultural exports totaled 224,000 tons, plummeting from 196,000 tons in 2011 and 182,000 tons in 2010. Compared to 2010, exports in the first half of 2012 were 19 percent lower.

The report, which based commodity comparisons on 2010, said potato and citrus exports were the worst hit in 2012, shedding 52 and 27 percent respectively. Apple and banana exports fell 19 14 percent respectively.

Apricot, cherry, and almond exports, the report added, rebounded slightly in 2012. Exports of the three fruits increased 15 percent in 2012, after falling 42 percent in 2011.