

Beirut Port bucks the trend with expansion

BEIRUT: A \$140 million investment has turned Beirut Port into one of the largest container handlers in the East Mediterranean amid growing demand for transshipment goods from war-torn Syria, a leading maritime official said Tuesday.

"Thanks to the new extension, the port now can handle up to 1.5 million containers each year compared to 1 million before the land reclamation took place. Now we have become one of the busiest ports in the region," Elie Zakhour, head of the Beirut International Chamber of Navigation, told The Daily Star.

President Michel Sleiman officially inaugurated the expansion of Beirut Port Tuesday.

The project was financed exclusively from port revenues, and officials said the government did not contribute to the expansion.

Contrary to the trend of most economic sectors in Lebanon, Beirut Port recorded impressive growth over the past two years both in revenues and in the number of containers it handled.

One of the reasons behind this phenomenal growth was the Syrian crisis.

"No doubt that Beirut Port prospered after the war broke out in Syria. The international sanctions on Syria caused activity at the Syrian ports to fall by more than 70 percent. Lebanese merchants are now supplying all the badly needed goods to their Syrian counterparts who visit Beirut Port to ship the containers in trucks to their country," Zakhour explained.

The wharf has been expanded from 600 meters long to 1100 meters, while the basin has become 16.5 meters deep, allowing Beirut Port to receive the largest container ships in the world.

The port authorities also increased the number of the giant cranes from six to 12 while the smaller ones jumped from 18 to 36.

Beirut Port has also become one of the busiest in the Middle East due to the high demand for transshipment containers from Syria and Iraq.

With the increased business at the port, merchants and clearing companies have complained about the delay in clearing the containers on time due to heavy congestion.

Most of the containers that were unloaded from the ships had remained stuck at the port for several days and sometimes weeks as a result of the heavy traffic.

“But now this problem is over after we expanded the wharf and increased the number of cranes. We can now handle 1.5 million containers without any problem,” Zakhour said.

He expected the port to handle 1.2 million containers at the end of this year after the completion of the new wharf.

“We are one of the few ports in East Mediterranean which have 12 giant gantry cranes. We are now competing with Turkish ports in terms of the number of containers we handle each year.”

Zakhour said the Syrian conflict has been seen as a boon not only for Beirut Port but Lebanese merchants and suppliers as well.

“Many Lebanese merchants are now ordering large amount of goods from abroad in order to be shipped to Syria,” he said.

Fuel oil and oil derivatives are among the top shopping items for Syria.

Beirut Port revenues registered a growth of 18.9 percent in the first nine months of this year compared to a growth of 11.9 percent in the same period of last year.

The number of containers handled by Beirut Port in the month of September alone stood at 40,000 containers compared to 30,000 in the same month of last year.

“The port made a gross revenue of \$164 million in the first nine months of this year and this trend will continue till the end of this year. The future looks very promising for Beirut Port,” Zakhour said.