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Truckers plan strike over filling of fourth port basin  
By Mazin Sidahmed

BEIRUT: The truckers syndicate at the Port of Beirut is planning to stage a strike in protest of the controversial project to fill the port's fourth basin, the head of the syndicate said Friday. "On Monday, we begin an open-ended strike," Naim Sawaya, head of the truckers syndicate, told The Daily Star. "The Cabinet hasn't done anything. All the Christian parties are standing with us, and the prime minister is not taking a stand ... so we will strike."

The project has reached a boiling point as the Cabinet has yet to take a decision on whether or not the basin should be filled.

Work started early in the month but was halted by the Public Works and Transportation Ministry to allow the government to discuss the issue, following an earlier strike by the truckers and pressure from political groups.

There are conflicting reports on whether or not work has started again despite the government request. Sawaya said that the Port Authority has been working for the past 20 days, with drilling and filling the basin.

A representative from the Abdul Rahman Hourie Company, the construction company contracted to carry out the work, told The Daily Star that they have only begun preparations and have a tentative start date in February.

The way in which Abdul-Rahman Hourie was awarded the contract – which, according to their website, is worth \$123 million – has come under scrutiny by all parties opposed to the project.

There was no official tender released by the government in 2009 when it was awarded to it, meaning they may not have got the most competitive price. Sawaya insists that the project should cost no more than \$70 million.

A representative of Abdul-Rahman Hourie declined to comment on the issue. Hasan Koraytem, the head of the Port Authority, which contracted the project, was unavailable for comment.

The issue was overshadowed in Cabinet by the clashes between Hezbollah and Israel in the occupied Shebaa Farms earlier this week. Several representatives from the

Lebanese Forces, Marada, Free Patriotic Movement, Kataeb and Tashnak parties have come out in support of the truckers.

The Maronite Patriarchate in Bkirki formed a committee to investigate the issue earlier this week and concluded that there was no economic benefit to filling the basin.

The Al-Liwaa newspaper reported Friday that Education Minister Elias Bou Saab and Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil requested an explanation from Prime Minister Tammam Salam about the situation at the port, but the prime minister refused as it was not on the agenda.

However, Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt questioned the opposition to the project.

“Why is there all this chaos surrounding this issue when it had complete approval by the previous government and it meets all legal and financial requirements?” Jumblatt said last week.

The Cabinet is set to meet Wednesday to come to a final decision on the project.

The Port Authority initiated the filling of the fourth basin as the second phase in a long-term project to make the Port of Beirut a transshipment hub.

Filling the basin will allow more space for storing containers.

Port workers argue that the filling of the fourth basin – which they describe as the most important basin the Middle East for its depth and economic activity – will put the jobs of 1500 port workers, mostly truckers, at risk.

The fourth basin is the largest at the port and the only one with enough quay space to accept large cargo ships.

These cargo ships put shipping agents and truckers to work as they unload shipments that are transported across Lebanon, while containers are stored at the port temporarily to be taken elsewhere.

The basin has been closed for three months and anecdotal accounts on the effect of the closure are conflicting.

President of the International Chamber of Navigation Elie Zakhour said that he had seen plenty of cargo boats during his visits and that port activity was continuing as usual.

Sawaya said that there have been several ships unable to dock at the port due to lack of space.