

South Africa's example could benefit Lebanon

BUT POST-APARTHEID TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION IS NOT A ONCE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION

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Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Professor Alex Boraine, former deputy chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said over the weekend that Lebanon can learn lessons from his country post-Apartheid reconciliation process, during a conference in Beirut organized by UMAM Documentation and Research.

Boraine expressed his concern at Lebanon's "deeply precarious" situation and said that great strides could be made if people were finally allowed to come to terms with the civil conflict that ended nearly 20 years ago.

"You can't turn the page until you've read it," he told *The Daily Star* at Hamra's Crowne Plaza Hotel. "Some sort of truth and reconciliation process could be very positive in allowing the Lebanese to take control of their own destinies again."

Boraine, speaking in his role as chair of the International Center for Transitional Justice, said that a resolution to the current stalemate would be difficult without an open and public reconciliation with the past.

"People are very concerned with coming to terms with the events of the Civil War" he said, "They genuinely want to know what happened to their family

and friends who just disappeared. But there's also a reluctance to dig up the past." This, he added, was the biggest obstacle to any sort of coming-to-terms process in the country but he emphasized that methods of reconciliation that were "just and wise" in the Lebanese context were still achievable.

During his visit, Boraine spoke to leading figures from the government, the UN and NGOs working across the country about the possibilities and implications of a truth and reconciliation formula in Lebanon.

Boraine said that following a meeting with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, the premier seemed like "a very lonely man," dismissing as "unfair" suggestions that politicians are far removed from the reality of life for the electorate at large.

"I went to [Social Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad]'s house," he said. "It is a beautiful house but all the blinds were drawn, like at a wake. Lebanese politicians are living like birds in a cage."

He said that his discussions had revealed that politicians, civil servants and non-governmental figures were deeply committed to resolving the political deadlock, for the benefit of Lebanon as a whole.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is often



From left: German Ambassador Hansjorg Haber and UMAM Documentation and Research head Lokman Slim with Boraine.

seen as a model for countries emerging from periods of civil conflict. Established in 1995 during Nelson Mandela's presidency and under the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the commission established a public forum for victims and perpetrators of Apartheid oppression to voice their experi-

ences of the 46-year regime. The process is regarded by many as the catalyst for South African stability in the post-Apartheid era, and was chaired by the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

"It was an open, public process," Boraine explained. "The cameras were there and

people who appeared in front of the commission, almost 7,000, had to be completely honest about their experience." South African television broadcast the proceedings extensively between 1996 and 1998, allowing millions of people across the country to be involved in its progress. Boraine stated that

one of the panel's most significant achievements was its provision of an arena where atrocities and grievances could be placed on record. This, for the greater part, allowed members of a crippled and divided society to air a collective experience, and to construct a new social environment built on foundations

free of past injustices. Lebanon's empty Presidential Palace and current political limbo are, he suggests, products of a lack of such a dialogue between once-warring factions.

But, Boraine warned, "Lebanon is not South Africa," repeating the opening statement of a speech he delivered at UNESCO Palace last Thursday. "What I wanted to say during my visit to Lebanon", Boraine told *The Daily Star*, "was 'This is what we tried to do in South Africa, and this is what we did. If any of it resonates with you, then try it in your context'. Our experience in South Africa cannot be superimposed wholesale on another community."

Boraine has traveled around the world with his organization, the International Center for Transitional Justice, which he founded while he was a law lecturer at New York University eight years ago. The organization has since grown into an international body with 125 full-time employees in over 25 countries.

"We have one representative in Lebanon," Boraine said, explaining that he hopes his group will be a permanent and significant participant in Lebanon's progress in the near future. "We are currently in the process of applying for full status here."

Morocco, Peru, East Timor and Ghana are just some of the

countries that have implemented versions of South Africa's example, Boraine said, adding that he has been involved in discussions with Kenyan organizations about a similar initiative there, following the country's post-election violence at the start of the year. In 2005, Tutu lauded suggestions that an adapted form of the initiative in Northern Ireland, which finally inaugurated a power-sharing assembly last year following almost 30 years of bloody violence, would be a positive device in national reconciliation.

"I believe in unity in diversity," Boraine said, arguing that a "commitment to the truth" would allow Lebanese to interact with each other through a recognized "common humanity," rather through relationships colored by factional loyalties. "It's very hard to torture someone you know is a fellow human being," he said.

"Lebanon is like the national dish," Boraine concluded. "You can't have *mezze* without a diverse collection of dishes." By removing one, the whole is diminished, he argued.

Ultimately, he said, looking back to Lebanon's Civil War would diminish the temptation to finish unresolved battles. "Once you've read the page," he said, "you can read the next, and the next and the next."

Photo by Mahmoud Khair