

# Government 'not honoring' pledges for disabled

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BEIRUT: A lack of government funding threatens the activities of institutions that have long provided for the country's disabled citizens, the head of one such institution has warned.

Al-Kafaat, one of the largest and best equipped institutions founded in 1957, is one of many private institutions that cares for the disabled. Home to more than 1,500 disabled citizens, Al-Kafaat was a founding member of the World Commission on Vocational rehabilitation and has been acknowledged by law as an "institution of public welfare" associated with the Social Affairs Ministry.

Raif Shwayry, the president of Al-Kafaat's board of trustees, told *The Daily Star* that the Finance and Social Affairs ministries have been trading responsibility on the issue of providing financial support to institutions taking care of the mentally and physically challenged.

According to Shwayry, the Social Affairs Ministry is required by law to finance two thirds of the cost of hospitalization and rehabilitation of the disabled, while the NGO pays the remaining third from private resources.

"The government, lacking public centers for rehabilita-



Al-Kafaat may have to reduce the number of disabled children it treats at its center.

tion, suggested that civil society organizations take charge with a yearly contribution from the Social Affairs Ministry, in a form of privatization of social welfare institutions," he said.

But Shwayry said that the ministry has failed to honor its obligations and is today paying less than third of the promised fees, based on the last cost study conducted by the ministry in 2004.

He added that the ministry has moreover reneged on its re-

sponsibility to carry out a cost study on a yearly basis, with only three studies conducted in 1996, 2001 and 2004 despite price inflation.

"As a matter of fact the state's present payments matched the 1996 study," he added.

The ministry's share of the daily rehabilitation cost for a man with cerebral palsy, for instance, was LL11,795 (approximately \$8) as stated in the 2004 price chart. But the ministry only paid LL4,500

(about \$3) in 2007, he said.

Shwayry also complained of long delays in payments.

In addition, he pointed out that Social Affairs Minister Mario Aoun promised to disburse 70 percent of the ministry's daily cost allocation declared in the 2001 chart, in a move that would practically raise the amount paid from LL4,500 to LL 6,000.

"This raise fails to cover the rise in oil fuel prices needed to operate the institution facili-

ties," Shwayry said.

Recently Aoun told the daily newspaper *Al-Balad* that several fictitious charity organizations and welfare institutions were claiming money for services and must be stopped.

But Shwayry warned that the Al-Kafaat institution found itself "cornered" since the Social Affairs Ministry wasn't assuming its duties.

Given the country's financial crisis he cautioned that funding was not approved, the institution would have to resort to reducing the number of disabled children it takes in, as well as dismissing almost 800 of its employees, particularly following the raise in minimum wages.

"We are a very well equipped institution and offer superior services, however, we had to shut down our therapeutic swimming pool because of lack of funds," he added.

Shwayry also stressed that Al-Kafaat was in no way associated with any political party or faction and seeks to help the less privileged, serving no fewer than 25,000 handicapped over the last 50 years.

Al-Kafaat is expected to hold a news conference on Wednesday at the Press Federation headquarters in Verdun to address an open letter to President Michel Sleiman and urge him to tackle the pressing issue.