

IT expert holds out high hopes for future

Politicians 'striving' for improvement

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Lebanon has the commitment at the highest political level to make e-Lebanon a reality, according to Talal Abu Ghazale, vice-chairman of UN Information and Communications Technologies Task Force (ICTTF).

"Both President Lahoud and Premier Hariri are striving to integrate Lebanon into the global economic community and the global information society," said Ghazale during the Towards Lebanon forum at the Phoenix Inter-Continental Hotel in Beirut on Friday.

Central Bank Governor Riad Salame urged wider and faster adoption of information technology in the public sector, in parallel with the private sector, as a strategic goal in the globalization era.

"E-Lebanon should become our motto for a modern, democratic, competitive Lebanon for future generations," said Nasser Saidi, first vice-governor of the Central Bank. "The existing human capital, financial resources and vision can make Lebanon the Ireland of the Middle East," he added.

Saidi highlighted the enormous potential of IT in socio-economic development through increased productivity, knowledge sharing, openness, transparency and overcoming geographical barriers.

"Plummeting cost, expanding access to the network and more powerful human-to-machine interfaces are the three fundamental characteristics of modern technologies in promoting economic development," said Saidi.

"The recent developments in nanotechnology and bio-informatics promise a revolution in human potential and productivity," he added.

Central Bank figures show that the number of ATMs rose from 368 in 1999, to 708 in March 2003 - growing by 23.2 percent each year on average.

The number of cards issued jumped from 249,076 in 1999 to more than 670,079 in 2003, growing by 36 percent on an average annual basis. The dynamic banking sector is now providing mobile, pc-based and internet banking.

Ghazale called on the gov-

ernment to integrate ICT into education, not as separate ICT departments but as part of the learning process and environment. An increase in computers and other internet-access devices (web-enabled phones, broadband and wireless fiberless) penetration is also vital.

Saidi decried the fact that the Arab world, with 5 percent of the world's population, has a mere 3.5 million internet users out of a global total of 500 million - a dismal 0.7 percent.

"Lebanon's case is more encouraging with an estimated 11.7 percent internet penetration. However the target should be 30 to 40 percent to put us on the path to e-Lebanon," he said.

According to Saidi, the root of poverty lies in access to education. Poverty in the future will be connected to the lack of access to ICT resources.

"We need to invest in infrastructure, change attitudes, and develop core laws and institutions to support implementation of electronic activities, including e-government," said Saidi. "We are facing both an e-readiness divide as well as an e-legal divide," he added.

Saidi's solution lies in "leapfrogging" into new technologies by investing in broadband technology. The ultimate aim is to go beyond bridging the digital divide and make Lebanon the region's provider and center of e-services.

Saidi called for a series of laws to enable an information economy and society, including laws on e-government, data protection, freedom of information, electronic identity and cyber crime and computer misuse.

He touted the benefits of launching SeBIL (Secure Electronic Banking and Information for Lebanon) as providing a secure platform for electronic banking and e-services for Lebanon's financial sector.

"A fully operational SeBIL system will enable the Central Bank, the Lebanese government and the financial sector to provide automated, secure services between the government, businesses and citizens.

"This constitutes an excellent example of private-public sector partnership involving all stakeholders," he added.