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Lebanon: Christians defy land-grabbers

Christians in Beirut have responded with defiance amid reports that groups seeking to profit from the explosion are trying to persuade them to sell up and leave.

Reports indicate that 300,000 families were displaced by the blast on the 4th of August. Monsignor Toufic Bou-Hadir described how people – including the elderly – are opting to keep their damaged homes rather than accept offers to sell their properties.

Stressing that Christian districts of Beirut bore the brunt of the explosion, Mgr Toufic said that in the past few days Church leaders had worked with politicians to frustrate land-grabbers by passing legislation preventing the faithful from selling their homes.

Nearly 300 young people packed Beirut's damaged Maronite Cathedral for a night vigil where Archbishop Paul Abdel Sater pleaded with them not to lose faith in their future or in the city, in spite of the explosion on the 4th of August.

In an interview with Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), which is providing emergency aid for victims of the blast, Mgr Bou-Hadir said: "There are people trying to profit from this catastrophe and buy land and homes from the Christians."

He went on: "People want to stay. A number of the old people – and younger ones too – are staying in their homes even ones that are damaged. With all respect to people who hold other religious beliefs, we cannot sell Christian homes to others. We do not want to change the demography. The land does not only have material value. It is our dignity; it is where we have our roots."

Mgr Bou-Hadir, who is the director of the Maronite Patriarchal Commission for Youth, praised the young people, who he said had been working hard as volunteers to clear the streets of debris caused by the explosion and provide emergency supplies to families.

Within hours of the catastrophe, ACN had approved the sending of emergency food packages for 5,000 families.

Mgr Bou-Hadir stressed that Beirut's road to recovery would be long and complicated, with reports that 200 people were killed and 6,000 injured.

He said: "I want to thank Aid to the Church in Need for helping to provide essential support. To begin with, there was just shock, people were just focused on trying to survive. Now people are taking in the full impact of what has happened, and they are realising just how hard and difficult the future will be, but our hope is in Christ."

The Australian office of the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) launched a national emergency appeal for Lebanon on the 6th of August, which requested prayers for victims and their families, and continues to raise funds in the wake of the deadly explosion in Beirut.

To support the appeal:

Visit: www.aidtochurch.org/lebanon

Phone: 1800 101 201 Mon-Fri 8am-5pm AEST

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