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Public Statement

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Lebanon: Amnesty International condemns the assassination of Antoine Ghanim MP

Amnesty International condemns in the strongest terms the murder yesterday of Lebanese Member of Parliament Antoine Ghanim in a bomb attack which is reported to have killed at least six other people, and calls for those responsible to be brought to justice.

Antoine Ghanim, 64, was a lawyer by profession and a leading member of Lebanon's Maronite Christian community. He had been a MP since 2000 and represented the Phalange party, another of whose leaders, Pierre Gemayel, was assassinated in November 2006. The Phalange party forms part of the ruling March 14 coalition which came to power as a result of parliamentary elections in 2005 held in the wake of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. Hariri's killing – in a massive car bomb explosion in central Beirut which also killed 22 other people – led to widespread protests against the Syrian government and by the end of May 2005, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, where they had been a dominant force. A UN Security Council-sponsored criminal investigation was mounted and subsequently the Lebanese government and the UN agreed to the establishment of a special international tribunal which will sit in The Hague and try those accused in connection with the murder of Rafiq Hariri and a number of other attacks and killings of Lebanese politicians and journalists which have occurred since the Hariri assassination.

The killing yesterday of Antoine Ghanim is the latest of such attacks, all of which have targeted politicians and journalists known to be critics or opponents of the Syrian government and of continued Syrian influence in Lebanon. However, the Syrian government has denied responsibility, and is reported yesterday to have condemned Antoine Ghanim's murder as a "criminal act" that could undermine prospects for political reconciliation in Lebanon.

The timing of Antoine Ghanim's assassination certainly appears intended to promote instability and further political division in advance of a crucial parliamentary session which is due to open next week. The main issue before the parliament is the election of a new national president to replace the current incumbent, General Emile Lahoud. By agreement, the new president must come from the Maronite Christian community.