

Nahhas: Shura suspends TRA's authority

Caretaker telecoms minister says OGERO chief trying to derail high-speed Internet

BEIRUT: Caretaker Telecommunications Minister Charbel Nahhas disclosed Friday that the Shura Council has officially suspended the prerogatives of the Telecoms Regulatory Authority until the Telecommunications Ministry sets new rules to organize the telecoms sector in Lebanon.

"A few days ago the Shura Council [a government legal body that examines controversial administrative issues] issued a verdict stipulating that Telecoms law 431 issued in 2002 has been suspended," he told a news conference.

TRA officials were not available for comment but a communiqué issued by the authority said that it would hold a news conference Monday to comment on the press conference of Nahhas.

The new verdict, which is binding according to legal experts, has further fueled the public perception that the telecoms sector has been politicized to achieve certain goals.

Nahhas has been accused by March 14 Forces and other critics of turning the telecoms sector into a political arena and many have warned that the behavior of



Nahhas: Nothing will stop 3G.

the minister may affect the performance of the sector, which generates more than \$1.4 billion for the treasury.

The minister has been accused of violating the law by withholding funds from the Finance Ministry.

He also had open confrontations with caretaker Finance Minister Raya al-Hasan and the director general of OGERO Abdul Mounem Youssif.

The TRA was established in 2002 in order to encourage competition in the field of telecoms, ensure market trans-

OGERO SAYS NO NEW SALES OF DSL OR HDSL ACCOUNTS

BEIRUT: OGERO has ceased sales of new DSL and HDSL accounts, ostensibly due to a lack of finances, a statement released by the state-owned telecommunications company said Friday. Two thousand clients are on a waiting list for the services, and that list will only swell for the time being because the company is unable to deliver, said the statement.

It placed the blame for the shortages squarely on the Telecommunications Ministry, which it claimed has withheld required finances from the company.

However, in a statement to The Daily Star Friday, caretaker Telecommunications Minister Charbel Nahhas denied that allegation, stating that the ministry had very recently provided the committee with a significant influx of telecom revenues.

OGERO maintains a state-sanctioned monopoly over all Internet services and landlines. Internet services, however, are often delivered by private Internet Service Providers. ISPs have been ordered to stop sales.

OGERO and Nahhas have been engaged in a war of words of late regarding the allocation of telecommunication revenues. OGERO chief Abdel Monem Youssef has claimed that Nahhas has compressed the company's financial inflows, pushing it to the brink of collapse.

Nahhas has brushed those accusations off. He argues that the way the ministry has conducted its finances has been perfectly legitimate, a claim that the country's Accounting Council has upheld. — *The Daily Star*

parency, monitor tariffs and prevent non-competitive behavior, act as a mediator and arbitration organism and to resolve disputes arising between licensees, prepare draft decrees and regulations, organize concessions, issue licenses, amend, suspend, withdraw and supervise execution of these concessions and licenses.

It also establishes rules of interconnection and reviews contracts of interconnection, formulates technical standards and procedures for monitoring

compliance with these standards, formulates standards and procedures for review of complaints and/or requests that might arise out of the present law and their resolution.

Nahhas argued that thanks to the ruling of the Shura Council, the Telecoms Ministry will be the only body to set new rules and guidelines for the telecoms sector. "The telecom is an economic sector and the main function of this sector is to raise the quality of services and expand this service to embrace

all citizens," the minister said.

He also claimed that Youssif is trying to hamper the introduction of high-speed Internet and the launch of the 3G service. "This man has been trying for the past six months to block the installation of bandwidth and international broadband that have a 201 Gigabytes capacity compared to only 2.5 gigabytes at present.

Nahhas reiterated that the 3G will be available to the consumers as of September of this year, adding that nothing would stop this project.

Responding to a question on who will be the next telecoms minister in the new Cabinet, Nahhas said: "I really don't have the answer. But all I know is that I am still the telecoms minister until further notice and will continue to carry out my work."

There is a general consensus that the next Cabinet will not attempt to privatize the telecoms sector because most ministers want this sector to generate high revenues for the treasury.

Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati seems to have strong reservations on reappointing Nahhas as telecoms minister, as this could provoke moderate politicians.

Reports say that the Change and Reform bloc may appoint one of its members as the next telecoms minister while Nahhas may become labor minister. — *The Daily Star*