Speech of H.E. Minister of Telecommunications Boutros Harb during the opening of the eAge2016 Conference at the American University of Beirut

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We meet today in Beirut in this prestigious institution that is celebrating this year its 150th anniversary. The American University of Beirut has marked Lebanon and the region with distinguished graduates that hold leadership positions across Lebanon, the Arab countries, and around the globe.

We meet today in Lebanon after we have succeeded to elect a new president for the country, putting an end to a presidential vacuum that has lasted over two and a half years, and has subsequently paralyzed the parliament and crippled the government's work during that period, and disrupted the entire Lebanese political system.

The election of a new president marks the start of a new phase that should be complemented with a quick formation of a new cabinet. We call upon President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri to act according to the terms of the constitution and form a new cabinet in the shortest time possible to put an end to the extended political crisis in the country. The new Government will have a determined major mission: To work closely with the parliament to draft a new urgently-needed electoral law to replace the outdated voting system of the 1960s. Any further delay in the formation of the Government would imperils the electoral law and the parliamentary elections next spring.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to celebrate with you the opening of your three conferences, eAge, AROQA, and OSSCOM, in our beloved city, Beirut. Your choice of the city to hold your conferences is not arbitrary. This comes along with the Ministry of Telecommunications vision to reposition Lebanon as a leader in telecommunications in the Arab region.

We have developed last year our telecom vision 2020; the Ministry's strategic long-term national plan that addresses the shortcomings of the telecom sector in Lebanon and aims to set the right framework for future developments.

This challenging project requires ample time and a consistent stable political environment to see the changes through. While the five-year timeline of the project is considered a risky challenge given the enormity of the task, good results started to emerge about the timely progress of the plan, confirming the Ministry's dedication to the project's speedy implementation.

The telecom vision 2020 aims at improving the telecommunications infrastructure by offering optical fiber services and nation-wide wireless 4G coverage.

In the fixed network, the plan has a strategic objective aimed at transitioning from copper wire technologies to fiber optics, connecting homes, institutions, office buildings, and neighborhoods with the "FTTX" technology, which has become standard in developed countries. Several large-scale pilot projects have been already launched, and nation-wide deployment of FTTX is expected to offer connectivity to up to 85% of citizens by end of the year 2017, and the whole country by the end of the year 2020.

In the mobile sector, the plan adopted a project to deliver 4G and 4G advanced services to all citizens. The implementation is expected to be completed by end of 2016, and is already covering over 90% of inhabited Lebanese territory.

This plan has significantly narrowed the telecommunications gap between Lebanon and that of technologically and economically more developed countries.

To date, and as confirmed by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the policies implemented by the Ministry of Telecommunications since 2014 have resulted in substantial and tangible improvements affecting Lebanon's network of fixed landlines, mobile coverage and reliability, as well as Internet speed and penetration.

Lebanon was acknowledged to be among the first three most dynamic countries in terms of the ICT development index; an achievement that was reported by the World Economic Forum, which categorized Lebanon as the second biggest mover in the year 2015 on the Network Readiness Index (NRI).

The policies adopted by the Ministry of Telecommunications have also been reflected in the Ministry's balance sheet increasing its revenues while reducing the price of telecom services by up to 70%.

In parallel with infrastructure development, the Ministry initiated a project in partnership with the World Bank to strengthen innovation and entrepreneurship in the Lebanese mobile Internet ecosystem. The project aimed at enhancing the mobile internet enabling environment and development of skills and attraction of talent. It is our conviction that Lebanon, through its youths and entrepreneurs can play a major role in the world's knowledge-based economy. It was unfortunate, however, that the project was cancelled by the World Bank due to parliament's inability to ratify the loan in a timely manner. The ministry is now working on updating and reviving the project, and should announce it again soon.

The Ministry of Telecommunications strongly supports your efforts to empower the Lebanese institutions of higher education by providing the necessary infrastructure to connect them through a national fast network, and internationally to the world's best institutions. As a former Minister of education, I feel the obligation to provide all the necessary support to keep the standard of research and education in Lebanon at the highest level possible. In this regard, I take this opportunity to announce the Ministry's full support to the LERN initiative, the "Lebanese Education and Research

Network", and would be willing to take all the necessary measures to see our universities connected among each other, and to the rest of the world with a state-of-the-art data network.

As a law maker and member of the parliament, I also have an obligation to propose new laws and legislations that stimulates cooperation among universities and facilitates the establishment of a fast fiber network for the research and education communities in Lebanon at a reasonable and affordable cost, and providing its benefits at no cost to students and researchers, with the ultimate goal of bringing the quality of education to the highest international standard.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We live in an "eAge". We live in an era where information and communication technology is no longer a "nice-to-have" commodity, but a basic necessity to foster economic development, improve levels of research, education and training. ICT infrastructure development is seen vital for entrepreneurship and small businesses that generate new ideas, new business models, and huge opportunities.

I would like to wish you successful conferences and fruitful discussions. I am confident that the outcome of your meetings would be of great value and impact on the future of our youths and our economies, and I would be eager to receive the recommendations that will come out at the end of the meetings.

Thank you.