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Soldiers wait at the entrance of Zawtar al-Gharbiyeh village, southern Lebanon, as Lebanese troops deploy in the area following the withdrawal of Israeli forces under a U.S.-brokered plan July 21, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Zohra Bensemra)

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Beirut — July 21, 2026

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Lebanon's Cardinal Bechara Rai, the patriarch of the country's Maronite Catholic Church, has urged for prayer and guidance as Lebanese President Joseph Aoun makes a critical visit to the White House July 21 to present President Donald Trump with a plan on how to disarm the Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group and secure Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon.

"However severe the crises facing Lebanon may become, this country is not lost as long as God accompanies it. This hope drives us to look toward the future," Rai urged during a Sunday Mass commemorating the feast day of Lebanon's patron saint, St. Charbel Makhlouf, on July 19.

"We pray for Lebanon and its officials, asking God to guide them in working for national unity, preserving the dignity of the people and safeguarding sovereignty. Peace is our choice, and Lebanon must choose the paths of truth, not illusions, because truth is what builds the state and brings the Lebanese together," Rai said at the St. Maron Monastery in Annaya.

The Maronite Catholic Church is the largest and most powerful Christian denomination in Lebanon. Rai is considered by many Lebanese to be the Church's most influential leader. By convention, the country's president is always a Maronite.

Aoun, a Maronite Christian, is the first Lebanese head of state in nearly 20 years to visit the White House, where he will meet Trump face-to-face for the first time.

Rai called for the preservation of his beleaguered nation's sovereignty, caught up in a destructive conflict between Iran-backed Hezbollah and Israel. The latest round of fighting between the two sides began March 2 as Iran came under U.S. and Israeli attack.

More than 4,300 people have been killed so far, according to Lebanon's health ministry, including nearly 800 children, women and medics and hundreds of thousands more have been displaced from southern Lebanon.

The Catholic Church in Lebanon has played a key role in assisting the displaced and providing spiritual sustenance both to those who lost their homes and livelihoods and other Lebanese who refused to leave their villages despite Israeli aerial and ground bombardment.

Aoun is seeking Trump's help to press Israel to implement a U.S.-brokered June 26 "Framework Agreement" between Lebanon and Israel that works on disarming Hezbollah, sees Israeli troops withdraw from large swathes of Lebanese territory it occupies, and sets the possibility for peaceful ties between Lebanon and Israel.

After the war began, Aoun quickly called for direct talks with Israel, a historic departure for a state repeatedly invaded by Israel since 1978. It led to the highest-level face-to-face negotiations in decades between the two countries.

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Yet, Hezbollah has firmly rejected the Lebanese government's direct talks with Israel — and efforts by the state to decommission its massive weapons arsenal held since the time of the country's 1975-1990 civil war and supplemented by Iran.

Rai said that "any agreement that preserves Lebanon's sovereignty, safeguards its national rights and strengthens the authority of the state deserves support." He renewed his call for the implementation of the "Framework Agreement," saying it establishes a gateway to consolidating state sovereignty and safeguarding Lebanon's national rights.

All parties must commit to implementing the "Framework Agreement," he said, stressing that "active neutrality" remains the national choice that protects Lebanon from the conflict between rival countries or groups and strengthens its internal

unity.

"Lebanon is called upon today more than ever to adhere to this historical message that has made it a homeland of coexistence, dialogue and openness," Rai said at another venue in Bqaa Kafra, the birthplace of St. Charbel.

He referred to the 18 different religious sects that comprise the rich cultural diversity of the tiny Mediterranean nation.

He said the Lebanese are weary of conflict and divisions and hope to enter a new period of stability and security — for peace and not war.

"Peace is the only path that preserves life, protects human dignity, and lays the foundation for future generations," he argued.

"Nations are not built through disputes or hate speech, but through reconciliation, solidarity and cooperation among all their people," Rai affirmed.