

# Assassination raises new fears in Lebanon

BEIRUT, Lebanon (CNS) — Lebanon's new Maronite Catholic president, Rene Moawad, was killed Nov. 22 by a car bomb, raising fears among Lebanese of renewed bloody warfare or a permanent partition of their country.

The president, who held office barely two weeks, was killed along with at least a dozen other persons as he left his west Beirut office after greeting diplomats on the divided country's Independence Day.

No person or group took immediate responsibility for the assassination of the Syrian-backed Lebanese leader.

The bombing took place in Muslim- and Syrian-controlled west Beirut where Moawad, 64, lived. Officials said it took an hour before his badly charred body could be positively identified.

Moawad's election Nov. 5 was strongly opposed by Gen. Michel Aoun, head of government and armed forces in the country's Christian enclave, centered in east Beirut. Moawad was unable to take up residence in the presidential palace in east Beirut because Aoun occupies it. Muslim extremist groups, including the Iranian-backed Hezbollah (Party of God), also rejected Moawad's presidency.

One Lebanese Maronite cleric who holds a high church position told Catholic News Service the assassination "will prove that practically there is not a will for peace in Lebanon." The clergyman, who is opposed to Syria, called Moawad a "man of dialogue."

There was immediate speculation that Aoun was behind the assassination. However, some accused Syria, which occupies 70 percent of Lebanese territory.

Lebanese sources said they now fear that



**A Lebanese soldier and Syrian security men inspect the wreckage of the car in which the newly elected president, Rene Moawad, was killed Wednesday, Nov. 22. The explosion that tore the presidential motorcade apart also killed 23 people.**

the murder of Moawad will solidify the de facto partition of Lebanon into Christian-, Muslim- and Israeli-dominated zones. They also fear a renewal of bloody fighting in the country's nearly 15-year-old war.

The bomb, estimated at 330 pounds of explosives, dug a crater and turned Moawad's auto into a twisted mass of metal.

Lebanese Prime Minister Selim Hoss called the slain president "the martyr of Lebanon's unity, national and human values, peace, love, hope and better future."

The United States, which strongly backed Moawad, condemned the killing as "a despicable act of terrorism against a man of peace."

U.S. Ambassador John McCarthy had presented his credentials to Moawad just a few days before the assassination. McCarthy and his staff fled east Beirut earlier in the year under threat from supporters of

ciliation," the chancellor, Monsignor John Faris, told Catholic News Service in a Nov. 22 telephone interview.

"The American government had put a lot of hope in this man," the monsignor continued. If the peace process is to survive the assassination, he said, it must "allow for the election of a president and a complete withdrawal of troops."

A conciliator who tried to restore peace and unity in Lebanon after 14 years of civil war, Moawad graduated from the Jesuit University in Beirut. His Nov. 5 election by Christian and Muslim parliamentary deputies culminated months of effort by the Arab League to find a political solution to the country's troubles. Lebanon had been without a president for more than a year because members of the Parliament had been prevented by one side or another from forming a quorum required for a vote.

Moawad was friendly with Syria, but considered by many to be genuinely interested in leading an independent Lebanon. He had received the congratulations of the nation's Maronite bishops.

Immediately following the election, a shadowy organization calling itself the Committee for Christian Solidarity had threatened Moawad's life. The group's membership was unknown.

Moawad was murdered one day after he told his countrymen, on the eve of their 46th independence anniversary, that their divided country was close to peace despite the efforts of men who actively opposed it. It was his first and only speech since his election.

### Correction

An article in last week's edition (*Catholic Courier*, Nov. 23, "Council to assist bishop in wide range of concerns,") incorrectly stated that Mark Seeberg will serve as president of the Bishop's Stewardship Council.

Seeberg is president of the diocesan foundation.

The *Courier* regrets the error.

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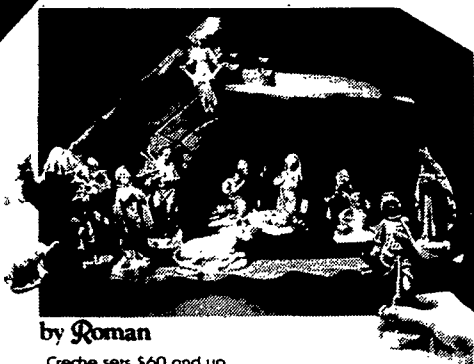
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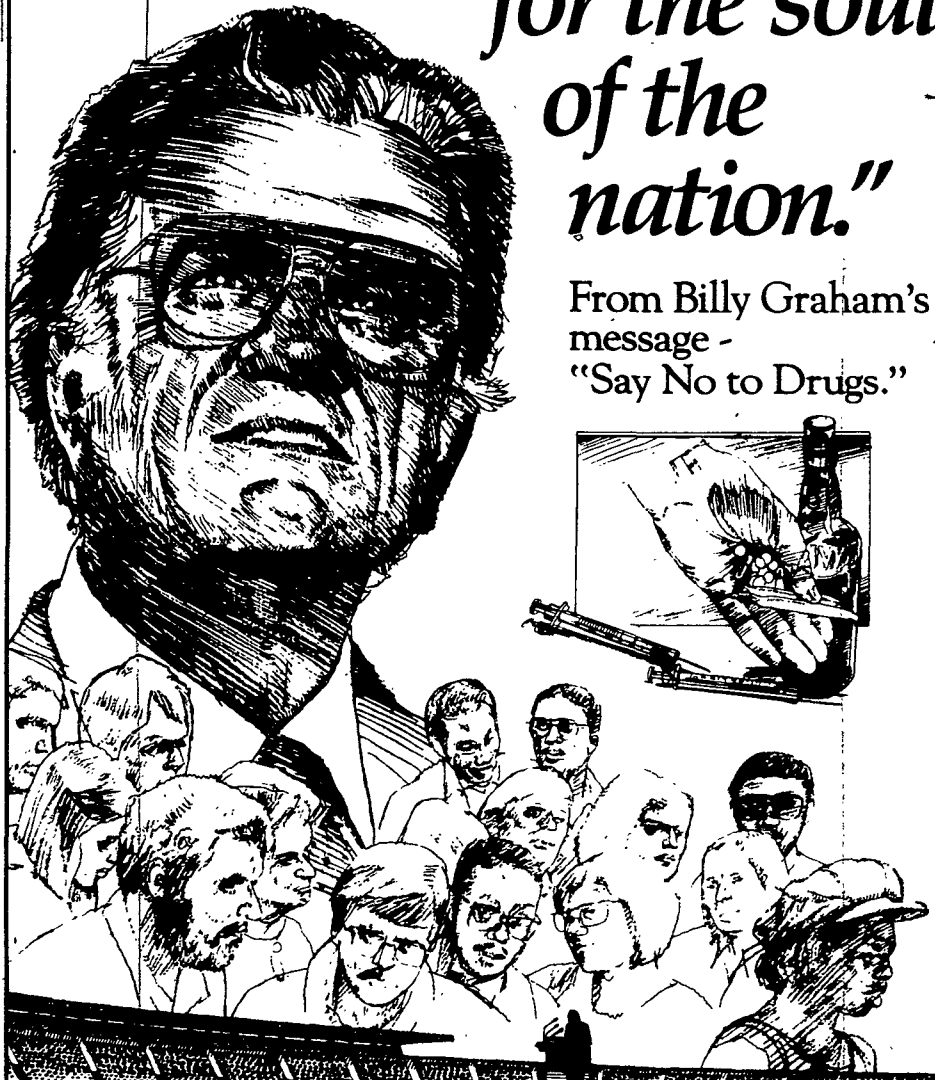
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