

LEBANESE LICENSING ATTRACTS HUNDREDS

Ninety-seven oil companies and more than 100 other firms have requested application documents in the pre-qualifying bid round for oil and gas exploration in Lebanon's offshore waters, Lebanon's energy ministry said on Wednesday.

"Almost all the international oil companies have shown interest. It is a good sign how many companies are interested in the bidding process," said a ministry official, reported by Reuters.

Names of the pre-qualified companies will be announced in mid-April, and the government aims to agree its first exploration and production agreement by February next year.

A conference last December heard estimates that Lebanese waters could contain between 30 trillion and 40 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas.

Energy Minister Gebran Bassil has said one southern bloc alone could hold 12 tcf, enough gas to produce electricity for Lebanon for 99 years.

Lebanon hopes that gas discoveries could help address its government debt and chronic domestic power shortages, but development has been subject to repeated delays.

The Lebanese government announced the first licensing round last December, and the deadline for bids is March 28. Beirut hopes to catch up with Israel and Cyprus in exploiting hydrocarbon reserves. Israel is more advanced in the process, and cash-strapped Cyprus would benefit greatly from an estimated value of €300 billion in its offshore gas potential.