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## Lebanon reports strong interest in gas exploration bids

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BEIRUT, March 20 (Reuters) - 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, an official at Lebanon's energy ministry said on Wednesday.

He gave no indication of how many bids had been presented so far, a week ahead of the March 28 deadline for submissions.

"Almost all the international oil companies have shown interest. It is a good sign how many companies are interested in the bidding process," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

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.

Interest in drilling in the eastern Mediterranean has grown since two natural gas fields were discovered off Israel.

Delegates at an oil and gas conference in Beirut in December said Lebanese waters could contain between 30 trillion and 40 trillion cubic feet of gas.

Energy Minister Gebran Bassil said in September that one southern bloc alone could hold 12 trillion cubic feet and this was 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 repeated delays mean it is already several years behind its southern neighbour in exploring those potential reserves.

(Reporting by Dominic Evans; Editing by Mark Potter)

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