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SAVIOUR BALZAN
Gonzi's new way of doing politics at MEPA *See page 15* ▶

OLYMPIC BOYCOTT
Casa backs boycotting the opening, Muscat cautious *See page 6* ▶



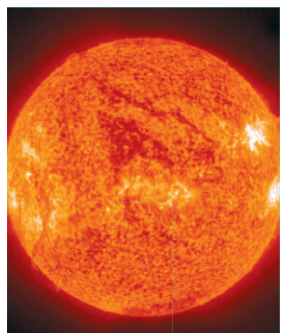
Mater Dei's first casualties: Nurses

Page 5



ABORTING THE DEBATE

Pages 8-9



THE HOT ISSUE

Pages 11, 23



GonziPN's secret deal on election eve

PM promised to appease Armier squatters in six months

JAMES DEBONO

NINETEEN days before the general election, and just five days after announcing he was taking over responsibility for the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA) to redress the country's "environmental deficit", Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi had written to the Armier squatters promising to legalise their seaside shanty-town six months after being re-elected.

The Prime Minister was replying to a petition calling on the government to issue an amnesty for the owners of illegal boathouses, and to intervene with MEPA to issue the relevant permits. In a verita-

ble case of pre-electoral political blackmail, the boathouse owners' petition states:

"We call on the government to issue the relevant permits and to issue an amnesty for the boathouse owners, as already promised by the Opposition leader."

In his reply dated 18 February 2008, Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi made it clear that "those boathouses built before 1992 will not be demolished."

He also promised that "within six months of being re-elected the government would consult with MEPA on the relevant permits" for the approval of a new development set to replace the existing shanty town with an even larger but more organised boathouse village.

Coming just five days after promising to take MEPA under his responsibility, the PM's commitment to intervene in MEPA's pending decisions on Armier blurs the distinction between political and planning decisions.

Lawrence Gonzi also informed Tarcisio Barbara – the President of Armier Developments Ltd – that he had written to MEPA chairman Andrew Calleja to inform him on the position of the government on this issue.

Gonzi also promised the boathouse owners that following MEPA's approval of the project, the government would present a resolution in parliament through which public land in Armier would be passed through "a title

of temporary emphyteusis" to the Armier boathouse owners.

The Prime Minister's letter refers to an agreement signed eight days before the 2003 election between the boathouse owners and Tonio Borg in his role as Minister for Home Affairs.

According to the agreement published in Mill-Bajja – the boathouse owners' newsletter – the government agreed to hand over 230 tumuli of public land in Armier to Armier Developments Ltd.

The land was to be leased for 65 years against the payment of Lm157,000 a year. This would amount to just Lm100 a year for each boathouse owner, the boathouse owners' newsletter claimed.

pg 11 ▶

Marlene Pullicino denies leaking Mistra documents

MARLENE Pullicino strongly denied being the source of Labour's revelations on her former husband's involvement in the development of disco in Mistra.

"Some even spread the rumour that I was the source of Labour's story. I did not know anything about the case," she said in an exclusive interview (see page 12-13). "I only talk to my former husband about our children.

Neither did my pg 3 ▶

Petition to convene Labour general conference collected

AIDES close to Labour leadership contender George Abela yesterday confirmed a petition with signatures from 140 party delegates had been collected, to open the leadership contest for voting by all MLP members, and not just delegates.

The petition will be presented to the party executive with the aim of convening an extraordinary general conference, to discuss the amendment of Labour's statute and allow party members to vote for party leader.

The amendment, if passed, will give former deputy leader George Abela a new impetus

to his leadership bid.

MaltaToday can confirm that support for Abela has also extended to some party officials. Close aides like former General Workers Union leader Karmenu Vella and PBS acting editorial chairman Dominic Fenech argue that Abela can guarantee Labour a sure win in the next election.

MEP Joseph Muscat however remains the favourite for Labour leader. His well-oiled machine recoiled slightly on Friday night, with the unexpected spin on PBS that he would be withdrawing from the race.

pg 2 ▶

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