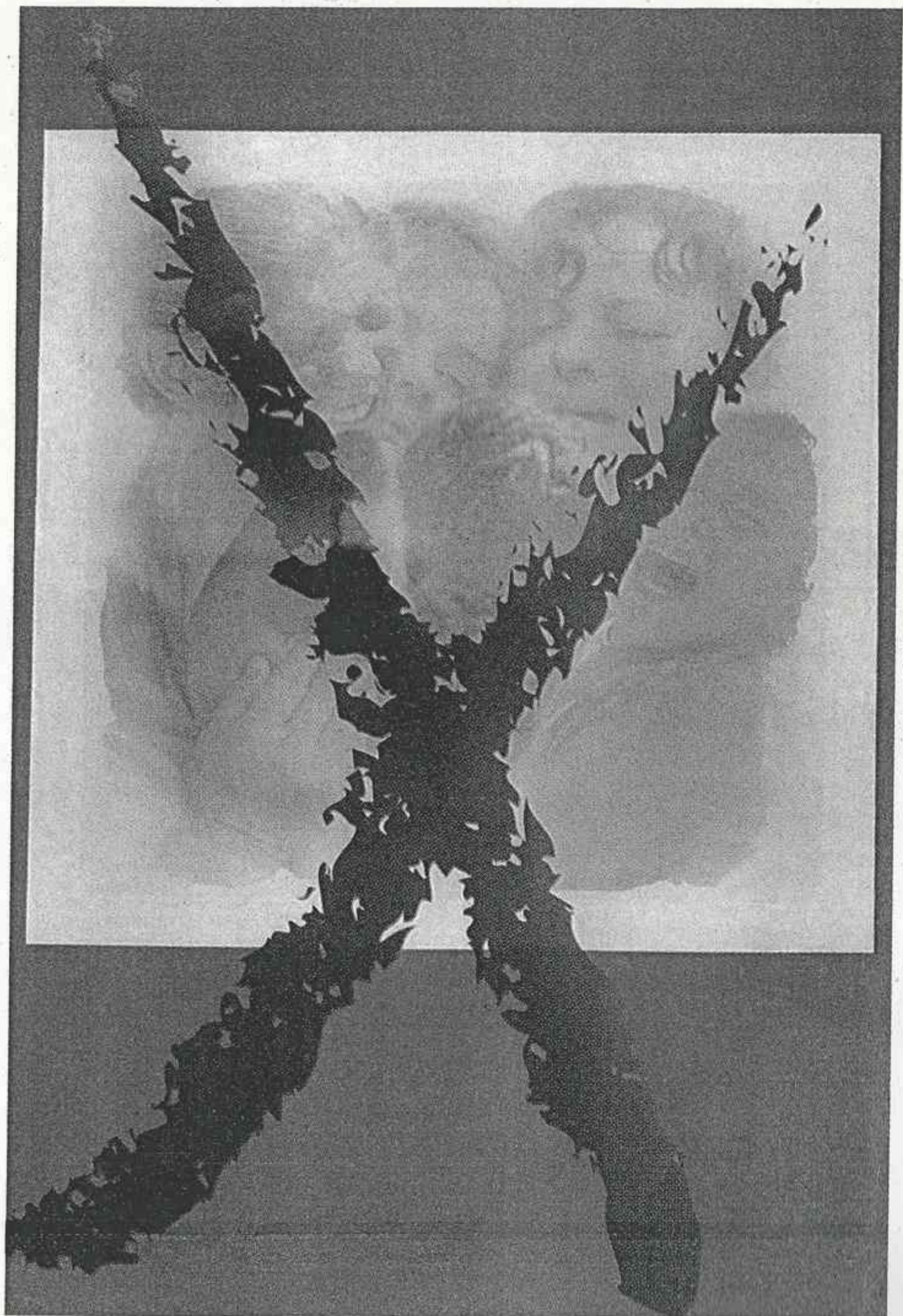


Committee seeks national day to commemorate civil war

Activists say holiday would help people come to grips with painful legacy of conflict



The campaign's poster: Efforts are under way to make April 13 a national day of remembrance

Christian Henderson
Special to The Daily Star

Commemorations of the civil war in Lebanon are elusive. One of the only official attempts at a monument is an anonymous and bizarre tower of concrete and crushed tanks which sits little noticed outside the Fayadieh army barracks above Baabda. The Garden of Reconciliation planned for the downtown area has yet to materialize, despite having been in the works for the past four years.

Given the contradiction between the physical and physiological scars that can be seen everywhere in Lebanon, and the dearth of attempts to remember the civil war, one could be forgiven for thinking that there is an attempt to erase the conflict from Lebanon's national narrative.

Paul Ashqer, an activist who is involved with the Committee of Relatives for the Disappeared and Kidnapped, believes that there is a reluctance within the country to come to terms with the legacy and memory of the war.

"A lot of people were responsible for the civil war," Ashqer said, adding that the memory of the war was for many shameful.

Of course one might ask why such a wretched conflict should be remembered in the first place. As the committee's campaign literature asks: "Shall we deal with the war as if it never took place? Is it useful for our children and our country to ignore it as if it did not occur?"

Ashqer believes that society should not forget the civil war, but rather seek to remember it and use that memory as a form of reconciliation.

"Remembrance is problematic in this country, but it is important for the mental health of the country," he explained.

As the campaign literature argues: "Civilized people do not forget; they seek to be reconciled with their past and to learn from it"

In an attempt to ensure that the memory of the civil war is used in a beneficial and positive manner, the committee is now spearheading the efforts of a number of activists lobbying to

تذكّر ما تنعاد

create a national holiday on a Day of Remembrance.

The day, currently proposed for April 13, would not only be dedicated to those who were kidnapped, but also to all of the victims of the civil war.

April 13 is an appropriate date for such a day. On that date in 1975 a bus carrying Palestinians was ambushed as it drove through the neighborhood of Ain al-Rummaneh and 26 people were killed. The event is considered by many to be the start of the 15-year conflict.

The Committee of Relatives for the Disappeared and Kidnapped has a long history of activism in Lebanon. It was established in 1982 as a solidarity group for the relatives of the thousands of people who were

Is it useful for our children and country to ignore it as if it did not occur?

abducted during the war. As the majority of those kidnapped were men, the groups predominantly consisted of the wives and mothers left behind.

The group reached out across sectarian and national divides, so that Palestinian and Westerners whose relations were kidnapped were also included in the movement. This pluralistic group, in which women played a major role, was integral in the peace movement in Lebanon, and was involved in organizing the peace demonstrations that crossed the Green Line in the late 1980s.

This experience, along with the nature of the committee, has now been put into good use in lobbying for the Day of Remembrance.

Ashqer explained that the group was integral in organizing for the day.

"They know how to unify and integrate the other groups who are involved around this

issue," he said. "Because the people involved in the group come from all communities, the group is nonsectarian."

Wadad Halwani, the president of the committee and someone whom Ashqer describes as "vital" to the whole campaign, explained that her husband was kidnapped in 1982.

"I felt I lost a part of myself and the father of my children... the experience of someone stealing him from you is very disturbing and hard," Widad said.

She added that the feelings of the relatives of the kidnapped were very bitter and that a national day might soothe some of those feelings through official recognition of their suffering.

Another one of the demands of the committee is to raise a monument to the victims of the civil war. Ashqer said that the various militias and parties had all erected their own forms of monuments in the neighborhoods in which they are dominant. But he stressed the need for a nonsectarian monument.

The committee has planned a number of activities this year in order to raise awareness of April 13.

A film festival featuring local and international films on the subject of abduction will be held at the Medina Theater. Laura Bonaparte, a leading figure in Argentina's Movement for the Disappeared, which publicized the Argentine government's illegal assassinations, will speak of her experiences.

There are also other events planned, such as a number of public meetings in Beirut and South Lebanon.

A remembrance day for the civil war is seen by many as being vital to reconciliation efforts in Lebanon, and the committee sees it as central to stemming extremism.

As a victim of displacement during the civil war who was previously interviewed by The Daily Star said: "Even though

the war is over, it must be remembered, especially by those too young to remember, as a reminder to all Lebanese of something horrible that should never happen again"

More information on the campaign is available at 03/741412, 01/806685 or at the e-mail address: kidnapped961@yahoo.com

PROGRAM OF EVENTS

April 11
Conference
Medina Theater
3.00pm
Guest speakers including Laura Bonaparte

April 11 and 12
Film festival
Medina Theater

April 11
7pm Les "Folles" d' Istanbul
French with Arabic subtitles

Pour l'Amour de Demain
French with Arabic subtitles

9pm
Nostalgie Arabic

Lebanon Under the Storm
Arabic with French subtitles

April 12
7.00pm Long Night's Journey
Into Day (English)

To You Where You Are
(Arabic)

9.45pm No Man's Land
English with Arabic subtitles

April 13
Gathering in Martyrs Square
6pm

The campaign will also be holding events in Tyre, the Bekaa and Tripoli until the beginning of May