

Families of Lebanon's War Missing Choose to Forgive Past

By SARAH EL DEEB November 28, 2018



Family members hold pictures of their relatives who went missing during the Lebanese 1975-90 civil war, during a press conference in front of the U.N. headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon, Wednesday, Nov. 28, 2018. Families of Lebanon's war missing are calling on their government to form a commission expected to look into their relatives' fate nearly three decades after the war ended. (AP Photo/Bilal Hussein)

BEIRUT (AP) — Families of people who went missing during Lebanon's civil war called on the government Wednesday to expedite the formation of a commission to look into the fate of relatives and urged those who know what happened to come forward nearly three decades after the conflict ended.

The families say they are not seeking punishment but want to find out what happened to their loved ones, find closure and bury remains that can still be unearthed.

Parliament earlier this month passed a law calling for the commission and affirming the right of relatives to know for families of an estimated 17,000 people missing in the 1975-1990 war. The law was a milestone -- an official recognition of the problem after years of campaigning by the families.

Some argued the law and the commission would ignite old hatreds and possibly revenge. But family members have sought to encourage people with information to come forward, stressing that they have chosen to trade forgiveness for the right to know.

“This law didn’t come to create new conflicts but to end old ones,” said Wadad Halwani, founder of the families of the missing committee whose husband was kidnapped in 1982.

“Our forgiveness is not personal. It is a humane message. We are trading accountability for the crimes of the past for a leap ... toward the future.”

Halwani said the law aims to regulate the flow of information, guaranteeing “the right environment” for those who choose to come forward “so we can turn the page of the past together ... and close this file and end our sorrows.”

The shadow of the civil war hovers over much of Lebanon’s present and future, with no reconciliation and a sectarian-based political system that tries to preserve a negotiated balance between the sects that fought in the war.

The system often stalls when politicians disagree, including when it failed to elect a president or a parliament for years. Currently, politicians are unable to form a new government six months after a new parliament was elected. The stalemate is likely to further delay the naming of the commission.

Lawmakers bickered over the law for years, right up until the last minute of voting on Nov. 12.

Some introduced a clause that called for punishing those responsible for kidnappings, apparently seeking to upend a consensus vote.

The families said they didn’t seek the clause.

“Any threat of punishment now can complicate finding the truth,” said Nizar Saghieh, a rights lawyer from Legal Agenda who helped the families’ campaign.

Saghieh said the clause was unnecessary since the crime of forced disappearance is punishable by Lebanese law and doesn’t fall under the amnesty. But forced disappearance is a difficult crime to prove because people fear providing information or have passed away.

So families have chosen to seek information, not punishment.

Amnesty is only granted in the cases of enforced disappearance if the fate of the missing is determined, Saghieh said.

Some saw this as incentive for those who know what happened to speak.

“This law doesn’t allow for the amnesty if the fate of the missing is not determined. This for me is a victory,” said Mariam Saidi, whose son has been missing since 1982.

But for Siham Abdul-Karim, a 55-year old whose son and father went missing in the war, the law serves as a reminder of an old wound that will never go away.

“Would that bring my father back? No. Whoever saw where he was killed or buried, would they give him back to me? I don’t think,” she said, raising black and white framed pictures of her father, missing for 42 years, and brother, missing for more than 30 years.

“The missing for me is gone and will not be coming back,” she said.