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Missing-persons group hopes for closure at last

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A group representing the relatives of thousands of people missing during the war gave a guarded welcome on Friday to the government's decision to actively attempt to solve the disappearances once and for all.

Wadad Halwani, spokeswoman of the Committee for the Relatives of the Kidnapped and Missing, applauded the government's "landmark" decision last week to establish the investigative committee. However, she also acknowledged that there was room to be skeptical.

"I know that many will tell me that forming a committee is like ordering the death sentence for any issue and that this isn't the first time an investigative committee has been appointed for our cause," Halwani told her audience, which included several old women who clutched pictures of their missing children.

Halwani said she was aware that the government formed three such committees between 1983 and 1985, "but we all know that these weren't serious" undertakings.

The difference between then and now, she said, was that this committee was established after an official decision by the gov-

ernment, had credible members and with a defined mission and time frame.

"It's a committee that carries a name: the Official Investigative Committee to Determine the Fate of all Kidnapped and Missing," she said.

Halwani offered some advice for the new committee.

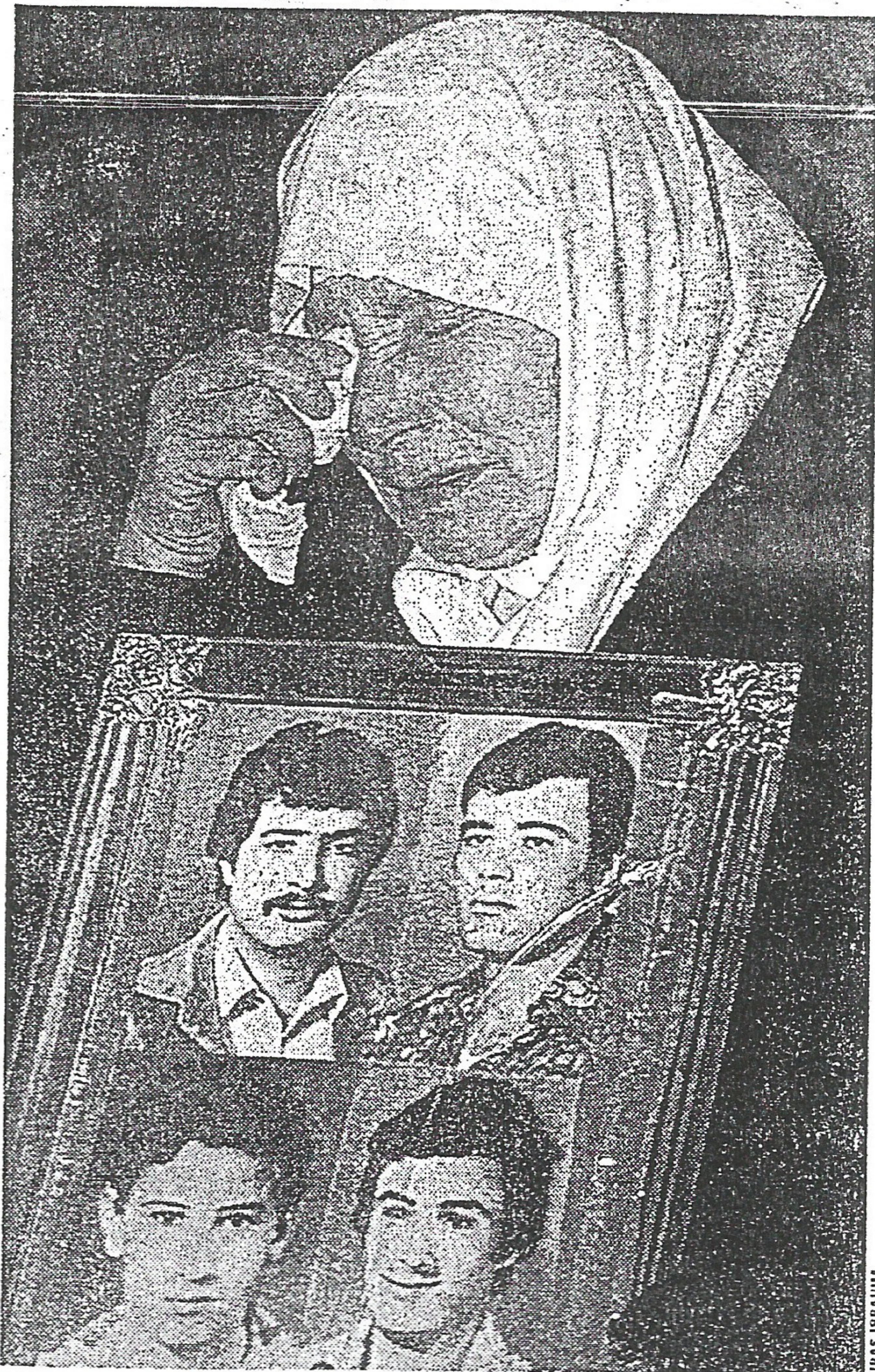
"Before the committee begins work on the ground, it should first make sure that every Lebanese family in the country is aware of its efforts so that not a single afflicted family is left out of this process," she said.

As members of the government committee begin work, they are required to take stock of every missing-persons complaint filed to police stations since the start of the war.

"They should also make use of the applications available at the Interior Ministry, in addition to those we delivered to Prime Minister Salim Hoss," she said.

The final result of this investigation, Halwani said, should be to determine the actual number of people kidnapped or missing since the war began.

According to Amnesty International, 17,415 people have been reported missing since the civil war ended. Some were kidnapped by militias in Lebanon, while others are believed to



For some people like Im Aziz, whose four sons are missing, the war will not be over until the fate of their loved ones is known

have been transferred to prisons in Syria and Israel.

After the committee completes its mission, she said, the government should reveal the contents of its official report to the families and their lawyers "to maintain the utmost level of transparency."

"The government should also announce the results of the

investigation, no matter how harsh they are," she added.

Referring to doubts expressed by Amnesty International that committee members had neither the power nor the independence to perform their mission, she stressed that although she had hope, she and others would remain cautious and anxious until "the truth is finally unveiled."