

'The time is now' to find answers for the disappeared

By Zeinab Makki
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Samir Berjawi's brother was kidnapped in 1982, but 35 years later, "nobody knows where he is or who kidnapped him. Nobody knows whether he is alive or dead," he told The Daily Star.

Berjawi was one of many who gathered Thursday at the Gibran Khalil Gibran Garden in Downtown Beirut for the annual demonstration marking the International Day of the Disappeared.

Every year, demonstrators seek to raise awareness about the Lebanese people who have gone missing since the start of the 1975-90 Civil War. They call for the passage of legislation to create a commission to represent

victims' families and have a mandate to investigate the disappearances.

Approximately 17,000 Lebanese disappeared or were kidnapped during the Civil War.

The Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon organized Thursday's protest in collaboration with Act for the Disappeared.

At the garden, family members and friends of the disappeared spoke about the commemorative day and condemned the government for its failure to help locate the missing.

To push for action from officials, participants wrote on scarves the name of a missing person, in some cases a family member, and the date of his or her disappearance or kidnapping. They then donned or held up the scarves and marched from the

garden to Parliament.

Similar demonstrations have been organized by families in other regions throughout August, including in Sidon, Tripoli, and Chouf.

The committee has come a long way since being founded in 1982. After many years of picketing and raising awareness with the help of former MP Ghassan Moukheiber, the government finally appears to be taking action.

Moukheiber, who submitted the bill in 2014 to create the commission, told The Daily Star, "We are making the government respond and I believe we will succeed, because we had enough stamina to push it to the point we are at now, and we will keep that stamina to continue on. The road ahead is as difficult, if not more difficult, than

it is right now," he said.

Later in the evening, at a panel hosted by the International Committee of the Red Cross at the Art on 56th gallery in Gemmayzeh, Moukheiber, along with MP Rola Tabsh and the committee's founder Wadad Halawani, addressed the matter before politicians, members of the public and the media.

Pablo Percelsi, the ICRC's deputy head of delegation in Lebanon, spoke and proudly introduced a short video animation on the organization's request to the Lebanese government, first made in 2015, to collect biological reference data from relatives of the missing.

Achieving this request would enable the ICRC to "cross-check DNA samples with those to be collected from human remains follow-

ing exhumation," according to an ICRC report released last year.

Despite the examples of progress, the question still lingered for attendees. Why hasn't more been done to address the issue once and for all?

"I think we have the final draft [of the law]. And the final draft should be approved by the first committee for the Parliament once the government is formed. I think we are in the final processes," Tabsh responded.

However, Moukheiber pointed to larger structural issues in Lebanese society that have delayed action.

"The Lebanese political system did not want to handle the past. War criminals pretended to make peace, but they did not take into consideration their victims.

"The challenge is to change that, and to reset the policy on victims – the families and the disappeared."

Moukheiber addressed the importance of achieving full national reconciliation while also addressing the basic rights of the families. The two processes, he said, go hand in hand.

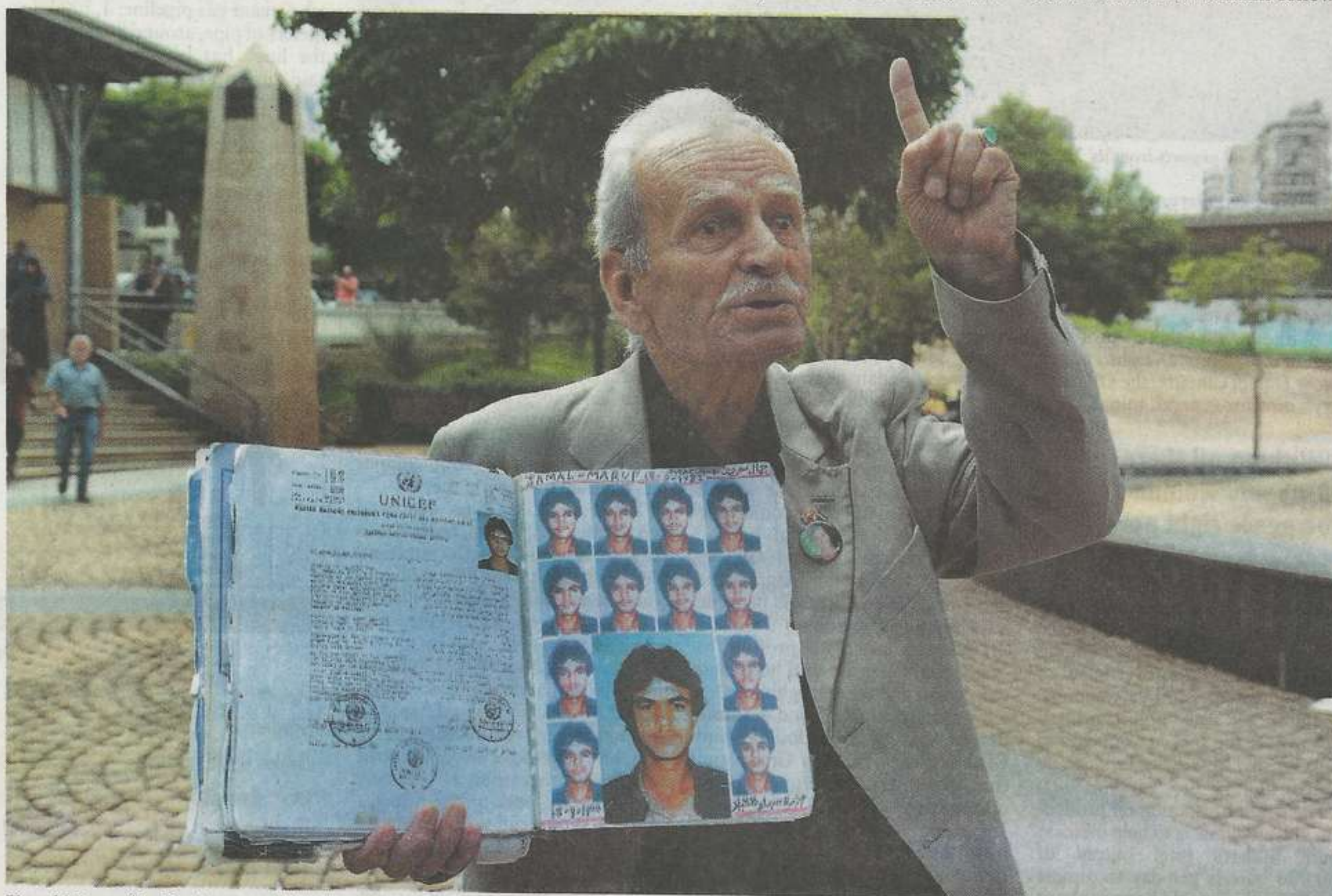
At the same art gallery in Gemmayzeh, an exhibition called "Absence/Presence" is displaying the photographs and work of six artists who depicted the trauma of the families of the disappeared, through each of the five senses.

The idea came from the belief that "between the fear of forgetting and the violent drive to remember, memory becomes a distorted, fragmented and flawed accumulation of sounds, smells, voices and images," according to a description.

Christophe Martin, head of the ICRC in Lebanon, echoed the sentiment when he tweeted: "Time is running out. 28 years since the end of the war, families still have no news on the fate of their loved one. We @ICRC_lb call on Parliament to pass the law on the missing. The time is now."

And 43 years after the start of the Civil War, for people like Berjawi, the legislative movement on the issue may bring a cause for hope. However, skepticism remains.

"We are the citizens of Lebanon. Since the Lebanese government is unable to take care of its citizens, do they expect us to rely on foreign aid to deal with kidnapping cases? Of course not. It is the government's responsibility," he said.



Kamal Maarouf holds pictures of his son Jamal who disappeared in 1982.