

Kay

From: Kim Ghattas [miki@inco.com.lb]
 To: <kidnapped961@yahoo.com>
 Sent: Thursday, January 27, 2000 1:19 PM
 Subject: article

Dear all,

With much delay, here is the article I wrote after the campaign was launched. I hope the prime minister's announcement that an investigation will be opened will bring serious results.

Best regards
 Kim

Looking for 17,000 forgotten hostages

By Kim Ghattas

Beirut, Nov 9 (IPS) - After Terry Waite, Terry Anderson and other westerners taken hostage during Lebanon's civil war were released with the help of their governments, the world just forgot about some 17,000 Lebanese who had shared their fate.

They are the Lebanese 'disappeared', most of whom are now presumed to have died in militia camps or are in detention sites in Syria and Israel.

Last week, a campaign was launched by the 'Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared' to put the issue back on the agenda of national concern. Titled 'It is our right to know', the campaign aims to pressure the Lebanese government into setting up a committee that will determine, within a year, the whereabouts and fate of all those kidnapped between 1975 and 1990. Wives and mothers of men abducted by the government forces or militias set up the CFKD in 1982 and a Friends Committee has now been set up as well to mobilize the support of individuals and organisations wanting to assist the CFKD in its campaign.

'Mothers, wives, sisters, they've been fighting their lonely battle for more than a decade, it was time we stood by them. But we apologise to them for not doing so before,' said Father Albert Abi Azar, from the Friends Committee and co-ordinator of the campaign.

'It took us ten years to be able to face what had happened in our country, this is why it is only now that we take up this campaign,' he added.

Foreigners visiting Lebanon after the war were often surprised by the apparent amnesia that had struck the Lebanese concerning the ruthless 17 years they had just been through. Ten years on, bits and pieces are coming up again in conversations and more Lebanese are realising they need to face and understand their past to keep peace in their future.

One of the other demands voiced in the campaign is that April 13, the first day of war in Lebanon in 1975, be marked as a commemoration day for all the victims of the war.

'So that our children know what it was and that it never happens again,' said Abi Azar.

It often took a lot of convincing during the war to keep children of the kidnapped from claiming their fathers back by kidnapping someone 'from the other side'.

Wadad Helwani, has two sons to whom she taught that revenge would not bring their father back. Helwani was one of the women behind the CFKD in 1982 after her husband was kidnapped.

'I asked here and there, trying to trace Adnane, but I don't have the means needed to find him. But I'm a citizen of Lebanon, I abide by my duties as a citizen, where are my rights, where is my right to know where my husband is,' she said.

'It's up to the government to look for him and all those who disappeared. We never turned to any militias for any favours in trying to find our men, we didn't want to fall prey to them, we always resorted to the government because we believe in the continuity of the state,' she added.

But until now the government has showed little intention to pursue the matter. In 1995, it also passed a law that decreased the time period required to declare a missing parent legally dead. This would enable families to claim inheritance or cash social security indemnities.

'How can I go and declare my husband dead, maybe he isn't, how can I kill someone I love,' asked Helwani.

'Only those who were desperately in need of the money would go and even then very few went,' she added.

Some of the kidnapped may also still be alive and while it is very unlikely that they are held somewhere in Lebanon, many are believed to be held in Israel but mainly in Syria.

Officially, there are still 69 Lebanese held in Syria, after 121 were released last year. Those fall under the category of prisoners and many receive visits from their relatives. But according to local rights activist Kamal el Battal, the number of Lebanese held in Syria is more 'realistically a four-digit figure', of whom nothing is known and which then fall under the 'disappeared category' It is unlikely the government will challenge Syria and request their release.

Finally, in 1991, an amnesty law was passed granting immunity to those who had been involved in the war. Many of the ministers and MP's were among the beneficiaries and human rights activists now doubt that they will show any willingness in unveiling an unpleasant past.

With the coming to power last year of president Emile Lahoud and his cabinet of ministers with no war history, hopes were high that issues such as this one would be addressed.

'The war hasn't ended in our home, we haven't been able to put it behind us, we're still waiting for it to give us back what it took from us, our father,' said Mona Hashoushi, whose father was kidnapped in 1982.

'We have asked to see the president since he was elected a year ago, we are still waiting for an appointment. He's been receiving everybody, Lebanese expatriates, businessmen, but not us,' she added.

Mona's father was taken away from his home in 1982, on July 15, the day following the killing of Phalange leader Beshir Gemayel. The Israeli invasion had already taken place and south Lebanon was under the control of the IDF and their allies, the Lebanese Forces.

'The militias came to our neighbourhood, 30 of them, circled the building and came into our house, they took my father saying they needed to ask him a few questions and would come back quickly,' said Mona.

'We didn't dare protest, I have a brother who was 18 at the time, we were very afraid that he would be taken as well,' she added.

Mona's father never came back, but she knows who took him, knows them personally, they were her neighbours.

Since the end of the war, Mona's family has raised a case in court against the raptors of her father, but they're still waiting for the case be addressed and hope that when it does, the raptors will be brought to court.

'But we're not asking for revenge, we just want to know,' said Mona.

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