

Protesters hit brick wall at Baabda

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Emotions ran high on Monday as some 36 members of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Missing during the War held simultaneous sit-ins in front of Baabda Palace, Parliament and the Grand Serail to demand information about their loved ones.

Peaceful protests took place in Beirut as committee members sat in between the Serail and Nijmeh Square. However, at Baabda Palace the demonstration became heated as some 10 elderly women, committee member Albert Abi Azar and committee president Wadad Halwani were turned away in their minibus from the palace gates by presidential security guards.

The guards and police who arrived on the scene ordered the driver back down the hill, where the passengers would be allowed to protest, and prevented people from leaving the bus. An elderly woman, Umm Mohammed, tried to climb out of the window of the moving bus, screaming "may God never forgive you for this".

A scuffle ensued as guards pushed aside Halwani and Abi Azar, who stood in front of the bus to keep it from moving.

"What are you doing?" they screamed. "Are you scared of a bunch of frail old women?" someone else said.

To calm the situation, Halwani - whose husband, Adnan, was kidnapped from their home during the war - and Abi Azar were promised a meeting with President Emile Lahoud. Meanwhile, the women sat at the



Denied entrance to Baabda Palace, relatives of the kidnapped protest further down the hill

crossroads to the Palace carrying pictures of their loved ones and a banner reading: "25 July is our meeting with the truth."

The committee is demanding the results of an investigative commission set up by Prime Minister Salim Hoss in January to investigate those who are missing. The commission was given three months to complete the report, but this was extended by three months. With the second deadline ending on Tuesday, families are demanding that the results be released.

"Why are you torturing us? If you tell us that they have died, then at least we can go and read the *fatiha* at their grave, but this way we don't know whether to mourn them or pray for their return," said Umm Mohammed, weeping quietly as she sat on the grass.

The women had often found comfort in talking to one another about the disappearance of their relatives, but a few minutes later they were recounting their stories to the guards and intelligence officers who gathered around them.

Hassan Musawi's mother spoke of how her 13-year-old son was kidnapped in 1982.

"He left home to hide in the nearby shelter at the Law School in Hadath. We looked for him for hours afterwards," she said. The Musawi family has received different accounts of their son's whereabouts but the latest news is that "the Lebanese Forces took him and eventually handed him over to the Israelis."

Halwani and Abi Azar joined the other protesters after returning some two hours later without having met the president.

Both were taken to see a colonel at Baabda Palace to tell him the story.

"How many times have we recounted the story? The colonel knows it by heart and everyone at the palace knows it, so we told him that we don't want to waste their time and ours because we only want to see the president," Abi Azar interjected.

Halwani expressed her shock at such "horrendous treatment of the women" and the fact that they had been denied a meeting with the president for two years. The committee plans sit-ins in the same venues on Tuesday.

Also lending his support to the effort was Metn MP Nassib Lahoud, who issued a statement saying that the group's demands were justified. "Without learning the truth, there is no remembrance and no memory," he said.

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