

Ranwa Yehia meets parents whose children's kidnappings still haunt them

Forgotten victims speak

Zeinab Jabr threw herself backwards and covered her face with her hands. The heavy body of the 68-year-old woman quivered as she let out deep moans. She then began weeping uncontrollably. Her grandson, accustomed to her behavior, calmly handed her a glass of water.

of Beirut's most destitute suburbs - Hayy al-Selloum. She suffers heart and lung problems. She has insomnia and refuses to take sleeping pills prescribed by her doctor. Giving up hope that she will leave the country, Jabr's children and doctor urge her to move to her Bekaa village, where the atmosphere could benefit her health. She occasionally visits her village, Bwarej, but by nightfall, she is back at her run-down apartment, waiting for her son.

about Ibrahim. A Syrian official told me that he might have been handed to the Phalangists. The Phalangists kept telling me to come back later. That's how it was and still is. The only difference now is that I seek information from those released from either Israel or Syria," she said. Jabr has made just one visit to her children in Denmark. They tried to convince her to stay but when news arrived that the Committee of the Relatives of Missing and Kidnapped during the War had resumed its work in Lebanon, Jabr took the first plane back. "Standing in front of Cabinet headquarters every week and meeting other families helps," she said.

immaculate Hazmieh apartment. "I have files up to here," said Emile Chaib, pointing to his knee to indicate the vast amount of information he has collected on his son over the past 15 years. "I keep saying I don't want look at them any more but then I start all over again." The frail 76-year-old law professor was composed as he described his son. Very slowly, he reached out, his arm shaking, to take a file from the pile in front of him. "Let me introduce you to Andre Chaib first," he said, beginning to list his son's achievements.

Chaib laughed at himself. "I was probably the first person to drop a letter in the complaints box that President Lahoud put at the Presidential Palace after he was elected. Some people received responses to their complaints but there has been nothing on this issue because it's forbidden to talk about it. What can I do?" Chaib's frustrations are understandable: "Why is it that only those in Israel are mentioned? What about the others? Aren't they Lebanese citizens too?"

Jabr was deep in conversation about her missing son and though tears didn't stop throughout the two hours that she spoke, she broke down when she recounted how her husband died in 1993 without seeing his son again.

Over the years following Ibrahim's kidnapping, Jabr's efforts focused on making arrangements for her 13 other children to leave the country. Two months after Ibrahim's kidnapping, allegedly by the Progressive Socialist Party, another of Jabr's sons, Tamer, was kidnapped by the Phalangists. But Tamer was lucky. He was released 10 days later.

Andre Chaib was one of three Central Bank employees kidnapped by militiamen on Aug. 8, 1985, as they attempted to cross over to East Beirut.

Andre, who has three doctorates, was the director of economic studies at the Central Bank from 1981 until his disappearance. He was also former Central Bank governor Edmond Naim's "right hand" and was even nominated for the position of governor.

He doubted there would be real results from the work carried out by the government-appointed commission "Nothing will come out of it and even if they found something out, they wouldn't tell us," he said.

"At first it never occurred to us that Ibrahim was kidnapped, but when we heard that there had been kidnappings in Hamra that day, we knew Ibrahim was one of them," Jabr said.

"That was when I knew everyone had to go. I wanted them out of the country so that I could concentrate on finding Ibrahim without worrying that my other children were in danger," she said.

Andre Chaib put down the pictures and spoke gravely: "Even if he was a bad person, like many of our big names here, he is still my son and I want him back. I would have liked to see one of the many governments throughout the years show concern for this issue."

"He was 30 years old when he was nominated for this position - a genius. Prime Minister Salim Hoss vouches for both his accomplishments and his morals," Chaib said. "They offered Andre high positions in Washington and Paris," he said, reflecting upon how much he wished his son had accepted them. "But Andre kept asking me, 'if everyone did the same what will happen to this country?' I'm going to explode from all this!"

Another file is opened. In it are handwritten letters of support from people all over Europe. "I know none of these people. They write to tell me that they feel with me and are working in their countries to gather support. I write back to them."

Jabr's other children tried over the years, to no avail, to convince her to join them in Denmark, where they emigrated after their brother's kidnapping.

For the next six years, Jabr visited every militia office in the country and even went to Syria in search of her son.

He disappeared into another room and returned clutching several pictures. "Ah! A World Bank meeting, Andre Chaib was Lebanon's delegate there, Andre Chaib at the International Monetary Fund meeting in Washington. Andre Chaib with the governor of the German Central Bank," he said, flipping through the pictures.

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Chaib believes his son is still alive, more than 15 years after he disappeared. "I don't know what shape he'll be in, particularly since he's a man of principle and conscience, but I do believe he's alive."

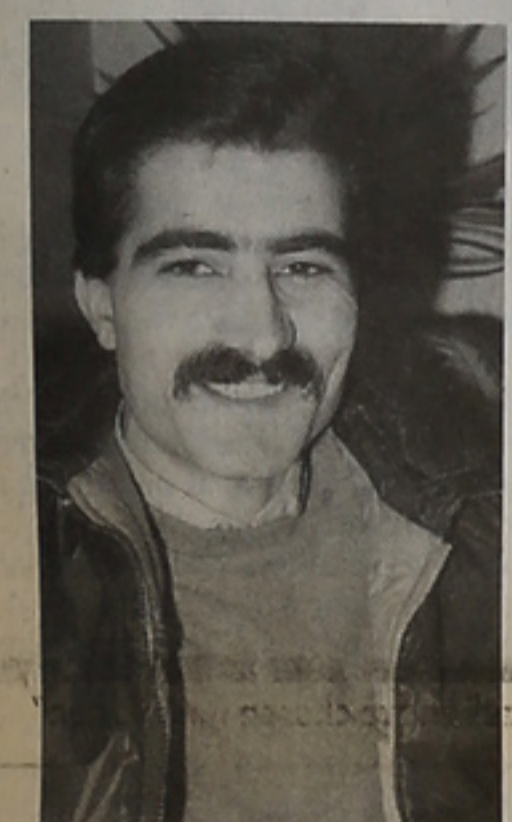
"How can I leave this house when I still have hope that Ibrahim will come back one day? I don't even sleep at night for fear that he might knock on the door and I won't hear him," Jabr said.

"The PSP people kept telling me that I would have to make a dozen more visits to inquire

Dozens of carefully organized files, each entitled "Andre," lie on the living room table in an

Chaib's greatest fear is that

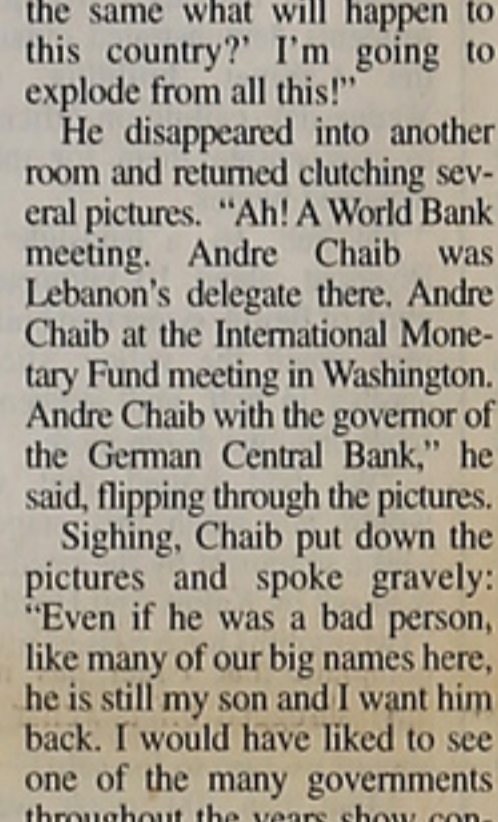
Her home is a dark, humid ground-floor apartment in one



Ibrahim Jabr: kidnapped 1982



Zeinab Jabr: no sleep in case Ibrahim should return in the night



Andre Chaib: kidnapped 1985



Ahmad and Zeinab Saleh: "I saw them ... My children are not lost. People I know took them"

the day will come when the issue of those who were kidnapped will be forgotten.

headed for his apartment two floors above, but he was shot twice in the back. Within minutes, his wife and three children were struggling to take him to hospital.

army officer told him that his children were still alive.

He never faltered, never shed a tear while talking about his son. There was pain in his eyes, but his final gesture said it all. Before closing the door, Chaib gazed down at the floor, hesitated, then was gone. Submission hung heavy in the air.

"They were in my arms and a minute later they were gone. They (Phalangists) told me they would bring back my sons in 30 minutes. I'm still waiting," Zeinab said.

Again, more complications arose. Before 1991, every lead indicated that their children were detained by the Lebanese Forces in Karantina. They even knew the cell numbers their children were in: 3, 5 and 10.

Another file is opened. In it are handwritten letters of support from people all over Europe. "I know none of these people. They write to tell me that they feel with me and are working in their countries to gather support. I write back to them."

What tortures the couple most is that those responsible for their sons' disappearance were their close neighbors.

When the militias were disarmed following the Taif Agreement, the Karantina "prison" was vacated. The whereabouts of the detainees is unknown.

Chaib's greatest fear is that

"I know every one of them. I saw them shoot me and then take my sons. My children are not lost. People I know took them," Saleh said.

"Some tell me the LF handed them to Israel and some say they were sent to Syria. The last I heard was that they were in some desert between Israel and Jordan," Saleh said.

Over the past 25 years, the elderly couple has pursued every detail that could prove their children are still alive or inform them of their whereabouts.

He and his wife took turns recounting their efforts over the years. The scene would have been comical, were the subject matter not so tragic.

The elderly couple, whose other children are now married with children of their own, still hope that one day they'll see their three missing sons. But as they grow older, their efforts to search for them diminish.

At first, it seemed strange that neither parent expressed strong feelings of frustration, anger or grief while recounting the details of their sons' abduction. But as the hours ticked by and they continued to list every person they had spoken to and every place their search had taken them in the past 25 years, it was clear that they needed to be engrossed in the details. It was their way of dealing with the tragedy.

"No, that's not how it happened. You're losing your memory," Saleh said, interrupting his wife's version of how she ventured to Ashrafieh in 1979 to ask about her sons.

"Two years ago, I saw Khalil in my dream. He was blaming me for not asking about him and his brothers any more and told me that he was alive."

Khaili, Ali and Ibrahim, the eldest of 10 children, would now be 46, 45 and 38 respectively. The family, Shites from the occupied village of Qantara in Marjayoun, lived in Sin al-Fil, where Saleh owned a bakery.

"I was there, not you," she replied, folding her arms and sighing theatrically.

"The government has done nothing for me. If only I could group all the men who took my children, I would kill them. You don't know how many times I considered a suicide attack against the people who took my sons," Saleh said.

On Sept. 18, 1975, Saleh was in his shop when Phalangists began shooting at it. Recognizing the armed men as his neighbors, he raised a white flag and

The couple recounted incidents when, by pure coincidence, they found more evidence that their children were alive.

"It is my right. The government didn't give me my right. I wish I could have a meeting with the president for three minutes just to tell him that I will commit a crime unless the government takes action," he said.

Death Alley," she said, smiling for a change - but that meant that I stopped going to the shelter. So in order to see her again, I bought several stun grenades that make a really loud bang without releasing shrapnel and I tossed them one after the other near the balcony of her family's house. They thought that the shelling had started again and rushed to the shelter, and I got to see her again," he remembered.

"After a night of fighting I would go there, my eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, and hang about the well to meet the young women there.

"That's why even though the war is over, it must be remembered, especially by those too young to remember, as a reminder to all Lebanese of something horrible that should never happen again," she said.

Suha was in the transition stage between school and university during the summer of 1976, one of the bloodiest summers of the civil war.

"We were young and immortal," she recalled.

"They were a breath of fresh air compared to the dangerous atmosphere of the night. I would offer to carry the heavy gallons of water for them," he said.

At one point there was a

War relic rusting - the odd fate of the Ain al-Rummaneh bus

Samar Kanafani Daily Star staff



"On its way to Jerusalem. That's the trip it should make" Mohammed Ayyash behind the wheel

The bus shooting in Ain al-Rummaneh was to the Lebanese civil war what the murder of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo was to World War I.

car-parts dealer, Abdel Abbas Hashem. She told no one and asked Hashem to sell it for parts. When Mustafa Hussein died on April 27, 1998, after years of kidney ailments, Hashem sold it to its current owner.



Love is in the eye of the beholder: the "cursed bus" in 1975

Tucked away in a junk yard in Harrouf near Nabatieh, flanked by lush pastures, is the carcass of the bus mounted on a yellow flatbed truck. Neighborhood children, like 10-year-old Mohammed Ayyash, often play in the yard, clambering over the wrecked vehicles.

Between Malaab Baladi, and Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp, Christian militiamen ambushed the bus carrying Palestinians on April 13, 1975, killing 26. It was widely seen as the incident that triggered the civil war.

The frame-number is solid proof of the bus' authenticity. Attached to its hood is an aluminum tag with the number 1360902086 still visible on it.

man that if he approached the bus, he would die. The cameraman believed him and ran away," said Mohammed, finding the anecdote hilarious.

war, was symbolically on its way to Jerusalem. That's the trip the bus should make." He paused. "But I might die tomorrow and do nothing about it."

The war came but the bus weathered the times. Except for a few bullet holes and shattered glass, it was salvageable.

The present owner, Sami Hamdan, didn't need proof. He "knew it was the one."

But Hamdan has more immediate plans: to bring the bus to Beirut, find a plot of land to park it, fix it in place and leave it standing as a war memorial.

"I've spoken to Byblos Bank to ask if they'll sponsor my project. They declined," said Hamdan. He also asked Beirut's municipality for a plot of land, but to no avail.

Mustafa Ali Hussein, the driver and owner, survived the shooting and fixed the bus shortly after his two months in hospital. Soon after it was halted en route, the bus was back on the road again.

"I dug up newspaper archives about the bus until I tracked it down in Hashem's junk yard," said Hamdan. "The bus type has sentimental value to me since I used to drive a similar bus when I was young."

"When I saw it abandoned there, I decided to buy it. I want to fix it up and drive it from here to Jerusalem." Why Jerusalem? "Just like Jesus took the road through Jerusalem, the road of pain, so the bus, by starting the

the relic of war still stands on its pedestal, framed by a scenic view, its fate determined by the rust that eats away at it.

Say "Ain al-Rummaneh bus" to most Lebanese and they immediately flash back to the start of the war. But for Rida Hussein, son of Mustafa Hussein, it was a reminder of good times with family and friends.

After the last bombing, and eager to do away with it once and for all, Laurice Hussein gave the bus away in 1985 to a

Once, someone told a camera-

Lest we forget: remembering dark years of conflict

Munira Khayyat Daily Star staff



Life goes on: the future and the past face each other across a street

Because most people's daily lives are not front-page news, it is not well known that most people's common memories of the civil war are of playing cards and eating pumpkin seeds.

Death Alley," she said, smiling for a change - but that meant that I stopped going to the shelter. So in order to see her again, I bought several stun grenades that make a really loud bang without releasing shrapnel and I tossed them one after the other near the balcony of her family's house. They thought that the shelling had started again and rushed to the shelter, and I got to see her again," he remembered.

"We would drive all the way up to the actual wall separating east and west Beirut, challenging the snipers to get us," she said.

"I remember the endless hours of just waiting for the fighting to stop," recalled Sami, who lived in Tariq al-Jadideh and was four years old when the war started.

Throughout the thick of what they call "the events," lives went on because people living in a war zone have to do precisely that - live.

Marwan, a Palestinian who groups during the war, shared his memories. "Every morning at 6am the young women of the refugee camp where I grew up would go to fill water at the communal well because the water was cut off from their houses," he said.

"After a night of fighting I would go there, my eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, and hang about the well to meet the young women there.

"There was nothing to do, nowhere to go. People had to sit together, talk, do anything to get their minds off the shelling. My family would gather around my father while he played the oud and sang old Abdel Wahhab songs by candlelight," he said. "Now, there's cable television."

Springtime would come and go, people would fall in love, children would go to school.

"We were young and immortal," she recalled.

"They were a breath of fresh air compared to the dangerous atmosphere of the night. I would offer to carry the heavy gallons of water for them," he said.

"It has been 25 years since the civil war began and almost 10 years since it ended. There is a generation too young to remember the dark years of conflict, yet the war lives on in the hulks of bullet-riddled buildings that have not yet succumbed to Beirut's reconstruction and stand in the scarred memory of every person old enough to remember the fighting.

"The extreme circumstances of the war threw people together and forced a kind of intimate cooperation not found in the everyday life of peacetime. This kind of closeness is what most of us who lived through the war miss," said Christine, who grew up in Achrafieh and was 10 years old when the war started.

"I used to go on joyrides with my friend on his motorbike past the snipers on the Fouad Chehab overpass, otherwise known as

"I believe we need at least two more months to complete the report," he said in a telephone interview.

"Swiss-cheese" buildings are becoming less prevalent, and there's water and electricity and paved roads again. But certain dangerous things haven't changed, like sectarianism and the continuing power of warlords," said Ghada, who along with her family was displaced from her village of Ramia, in the occupation zone, during the war.

"My memories of the war? I remember how I used to love," said Ahmad, who was a teenager and lived in Ras Beirut at the beginning of the war.

what the government's next step would be. "The findings will impose themselves and direct our action," he said. "It is certain that the government will follow this issue up. Everything will take place in due time."

Brigadier Salim Abu Ismail, who heads the commission, explained the procedures adopted since the investigative body was set up on Jan. 21. The body has received just under 2,000 applications, prompting Abu Ismail to consider Amnesty International's estimate of 17,000 an exaggeration.

"That's why even though the war is over, it must be remembered, especially by those too young to remember, as a reminder to all Lebanese of something horrible that should never happen again," she said.

"I was 17 and I fell in love with a girl who I met in the bomb shelter. We used to wait for the shelling to start to go to the bomb shelter to sit close together and talk. The grown-ups were afraid, but we were happy.

He declined to say, however,

the official report will include a final estimate of the number of missing or kidnapped, as well as details of where the missing are believed to be, if they are still alive, and a suggestion to provide the families with social services.

"I believe we need at least two more months to complete the report," he said in a telephone interview.

Families of missing clash with police during vigil

From Page ONE

gence officers. It was given three months to submit an official report to the government.

During his meeting with Hoss on Thursday, Abu Ismail intends to suggest an extension on the deadline set for the official report.

"I believe we need at least two more months to complete the report," he said in a telephone interview.

While the committee has struggled to keep the issue alive, it was only in October 1999 that it sprang into action. Whether it was the government of Salim Hoss or the committee's new strategy, or both, there was finally progress last January.

Weekly vigils outside the Cabinet headquarters since the commission will achieve results that would comfort the families - or at least some of them."

He declined to say, however,

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