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Families of Kidnapped and Detained Lebanese Demand to Know Fate of Loved Ones

Relatives of Lebanese kidnapped during the country's 1975-1990 civil war and those detained in Israeli and Syrian jails sent an urgent appeal to political leaders to help them determine the fate of their loved ones.

They demanded that the cabinet, parliament as well as top political leaders meeting at national dialogue talks consider this issue a top priority "because it deals with human lives."

Members of three advocacy groups supporting the cause of those kidnapped during the war and prisoners in Syria and Israel made their plea on the occasion of the upcoming anniversary of the Lebanese Civil War that erupted on April 13, 1975.

Wadad Halwani, head of the Committee of Relatives of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon, spoke on behalf of all the families Friday.

"We want to remind them of the war so it is never repeated," she said in an open letter to all Lebanese leaders.

Lebanon cannot achieve real national reconciliation without finding a proper closure to the cases of the missing and those held in foreign jails, the designated spokeswoman said.

She reproached participants at the dialogue talks for failing to include this humanitarian cause on their agenda opting instead to concentrate on purely political issues including restoring relations and delineating the border with Syria.

"The case of the kidnapped, missing and detainees is almost the only item that is not getting the attention of officials and their negotiations," said Halwani.

She said the key to healthy ties with Damascus should be by putting an end to the case of detainees in its prisons.

"This humanitarian issue cannot be postponed anymore, not even for one day. It should be kept clear of political maneuvering," she warned.

In addition to giving the issue top priority, the families demanded proper laboratory tests to help identify the remains that are being unearthed. They also requested the proper safekeeping of mass graves found at Anjar last year as well as the excavation of other burial sites in Beirut.

Around 18,000 people went missing during the civil war, when rival militias spared no method of fighting, including taking innocent civilians captive. Many of them are presumed dead.

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More than 600 people are believed to be detained in Syrian jails, including Lebanese and Palestinians.

Their fate has come under the spotlight since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri a year ago led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops out of Lebanon last April. Since the pullout, relatives of the missing have been staging a sit-in in front of the Beirut headquarters of the United Nations.

Israel, that occupied the South for 22 years until its withdrawal in 2000, has held hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians captured in Lebanon in its jails. Only a few remain detained after most were released in different prisoner exchanges with Hizbullah.