

Time to accept 'bitter truth' about the missing

Friday, July 28, 2000

For 18 years Widad Halwani refused to wear black in the hope that one day her husband Adnan would return home alive. Until the afternoon of Tuesday, July 25. That was when a government report declared that 2046 missing persons officially dead and Halwani had to accept that her wait was over and her husband would not be coming home to Ras Nabaa.

On Friday, at a highly emotional news conference in Beirut, Halwani, who had been at the forefront of the cause of the missing persons for the last ten years, wore black for the first time in public.

Hardly containing herself, Halwani put on a brave face to announce that despite all the sensations of grief and injustice she might feel, she has accepted the verdict and the fate of her husband.

"On Saturday, I will be heading to the authorities to apply for a death certificate for my husband, because from that moment, on Tuesday, I became the widow of Adnan Halwani," she said.

"Although my heart is broken, my mouth is dry and my eyes are tearful. But despite all of this, I'm overtaken by a sense of relief," Halwani said to the families and relatives of the missing people. "I hope you understand these emotions, because I wish that one day and hopefully soon you will feel the same." But Halwani's plea to the others for "forgiveness and reconciliation with the bitter truth" provoked anger from those not satisfied with the report's outcome. Saada Barraaj, sitting next to Halwani, began to pound the table, saying that she refused to accept the report as a final verdict. Barraaj maintains that without any

physical evidence to prove that her son Tawfiq was dead, she will continue to pursue the matter further. Barraaj claimed that her son was seen alive in several places, and the report of his demise meant that the government was taking the easy way out. She said Tawfiq, who disappeared in 1982, was spotted alive at a prison run by the Lebanese Forces. The right wing Christian militia fought alongside the Israelis when they invaded Lebanon in the summer of 1982. Tawfiq, she said, was also spotted with other prisoners boarding a boat heading to Israel.

"Let's say that we believe the report and declare our relatives dead, and a few months or years later they showed up alive. What do we do then?" asked Juliette Atallah.

But Halwani was intent on ending this chapter in her life. "Wherever they (the missing persons) might be, dead or alive, they could only rest if we abolish any feelings of hatred and revenge."

Barraaj and Atallah said that the investigation was superficial, and reminded the government of its responsibilities toward the missing persons and their families.

"If they want to declare them dead, then they should be considered as martyrs, and their families compensated accordingly," added Atallah.

Halwani had earlier reminded the relatives of the missing persons - men, women and children were present - of the struggle and the hardships and the sleepless nights they endured before they were able to convince the government to conduct an official investigation to look into the fate of the displaced, and to determine whether they were still alive, in prisons or deceased.

Salim Hoss, the prime minister, last January ordered the formation of a committee headed by Brigadier General Salim Abu Ismail to investigate the issue. The

widely criticized report says that mass graves were examined but the team was unable to match any remains with dental records of missing persons. The Lebanese government does not have the technical resources to conduct DNA tests, which would have helped the identification process.

Halwani praised Hoss and Abu Ismail for meeting the investigation's second deadline and not postponing the report indefinitely. She absolved Hoss from any responsibility regarding the results, but said "we had hoped that the premier himself would have announced the news instead of us hearing it through the media." However, Halawi was disappointed with president Emile Lahoud, who so far has not met the relatives of the missing persons. She reminded him of his oath, and how they had put their faith in him and his government, which doesn't include any of the warlords, but didn't live up to expectations.

Relatives agreed that the matter wasn't over, and that the government would not get off lightly. They demanded financial compensation, and the right to review the investigation's results for each of the cases.

Written by: Aly Harakeh, Cyberia editorial team
Supporters of detainees to go on hunger strike

The supporters of 19 Lebanese detainees held in Israeli prisons declared a hunger strike for August 7 after a sit-in at UN House. The strike aims to remind the government of the unresolved "human violation" which is in danger of being ignored after the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon.

"We are calling for a total end of Israeli violations, not only territorial but also human," said Mohamad Safa, head of the detainees' supporters group. "The detention of Lebanese detainees is a human violation, and that until they are released, we do not consider that UN resolution 425 has been applied."

The issue of detainees is not mentioned in UN

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The issue of detainees is not mentioned in UN resolutions 425 and 426, which call for Israel's unconditional withdrawal from Lebanese territory, but the supporters group considers it a continuous violation.

The detainees, kidnapped over the years by Israeli commandos or pro-Israeli groups, are being held as bargaining chips in exchange for information about Ron Arad, a missing airforce pilot whose plane was shot down in 1986. Those who faced trials are serving sentences ranging from 20 years to life imprisonment. Samer Qantar, held by the Israelis since 1979, is serving a 542-year sentence.

