

LEBANON

Quest for the Disappeared

Peace has come, but thousands of hostages are still missing

By LARA MARLOWE BEIRUT

ELEVEN O'CLOCK ON A FRIDAY morning and women are lining up outside the lawyer's office in Beirut—dozens of them, wearing photographs of missing sons and husbands around their necks, clutching graduation and wedding snapshots. They are members of the Committee of Relatives of the Kidnapped and Disappeared, which includes Muslims, Christians and Druze. Once divided by war, they are now united in grief and anger.

Among the women stands a stooped old man from Tucson, Arizona. Mustafa Farra, 78, has returned to look for his son Amer, kidnapped seven years ago after completing his engineering studies. Farra carries a plastic shopping bag filled with newspaper clippings about Western hostages and futile correspondence with the White House, State Department and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Over the past decade, only a few dozen Lebanese hostages have been freed through exchanges, and human-rights workers believe there are no more survivors.

Farra refuses to accept the probability that his son is dead. "I just want to hold him in my arms before I die," he says, breaking into tears.

During the 1975-90 civil war, all Lebanese militias took hostages. Some were held for long periods to be swapped later, but most were murdered, their bodies dumped in secret mass graves. While the outside world's attention focused on a handful of Western hostages, about 17,000 Lebanese disappeared without a trace in their own country. "People were not kidnapped because of what they had done but because of their religion," says Bernard Pfefferle, the chief delegate of the ICRC in Beirut.

High school history teacher Adnan

Halwani was one of more than 2,600 Muslims and leftists abducted in 1982 after the Lebanese army, then allied with the Christian Phalange militia and Israel, entered the Muslim quarters of Beirut. Halwani's wife Wadad was cooking lunch when the doorbell rang. Two officers took Adnan away at gunpoint. "They said he would be back in five minutes," she recalls. "That was 10½ years ago." For six months she told her two young sons that their father was abroad. Eventually she learned that her husband had been turned over to the militia of the right-wing Phalange.

"So many times at night, when I heard a noise or a dog barking, I thought

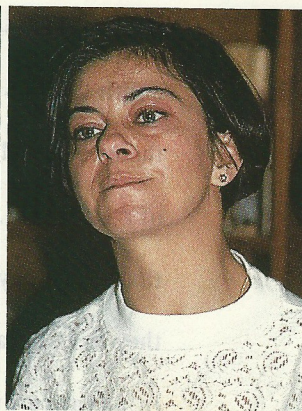
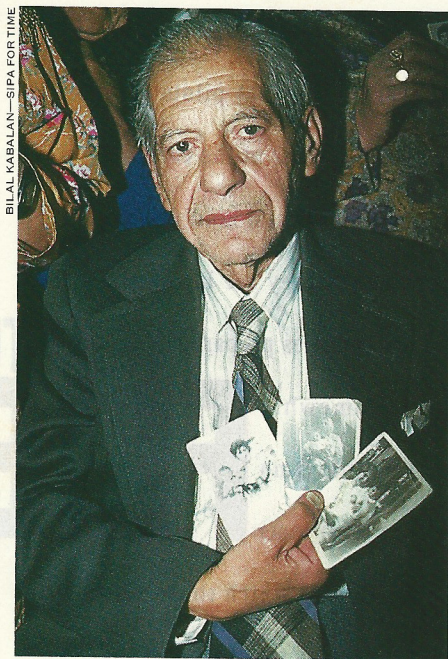
During the first years of the war, Muslims and Christians were abducted in almost equal numbers. Following Israel's 1982 invasion, Christians had the upper hand and kidnapped Muslims en masse; when the Israelis retreated, the situation reversed. Odette Salem, now 60, and her two children stayed on in predominantly Muslim West Beirut despite the danger. "Richard was 23, Christine was 20," recalls Salem. "They were kidnapped because it said on their ID cards they were Christians. My life stopped that day." She was told the Iranian-backed Hizballah had taken her children. Nearly eight years after the kidnappings, she goes daily to an intermediary who claims Richard

and Christine are still being held in the Bekaa Valley. Despite Hizballah's denials, she chooses to believe him. Hope breeds tragic illusions. At the end of 1990, Salem's middleman promised Christine would be freed on her birthday, Christmas Day. "I prepared food and bought presents for her. They're still wrapped, waiting for her."

Grieving relatives are outraged to see former militia leaders, whom they blame for the kidnappings, now occupying senior government positions. Successive Prime Ministers have made routine requests for information but accepted militia claims that no prisoners are being held. "No-

body has said to these people, 'You did it,'" charges Wadad Halwani. "It's the government's responsibility to expose them."

The relatives' committee stepped up its activities this year, staging sit-ins in front of government buildings and proposing a law to free families from the legal limbo in which they are caught: until the missing are declared legally dead, women cannot remarry, property cannot be sold, bank accounts are frozen. The law is expected to be passed in the next few months. The hostages will then be forgotten by all but their families, and across Lebanon—in basements flooded with concrete, under building sites, in caves and abandoned wells—mass graves will remain undiscovered.



Still Searching

Before he dies, Farra, above, wants to hold his son in his arms. Halwani, right, was told 10½ years ago that her husband would return in five minutes.

it was Adnan coming home," says Halwani, 41. "I thought I knew when he was cold or hungry. One day I looked in the mirror. I was so skinny—like a ghost. I decided I had to be strong, for the sake of the children. The army officers I visited told me there were many other women looking for their men. I said, 'Give me their names.'" That is how, along with human-rights lawyer Sinane Barrage, she established the relatives' committee a few months after her husband's disappearance. "If Adnan knew what I was doing, he would be proud," she says. "When I have a difficult decision to make, when I am tired, I see him in front of me, and I talk to him. Sometimes I hear his voice. He says, 'Bravo, Wadad! Keep going.'"