

Return of Azaz hostages bittersweet for families of disappeared

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A boy cycles near the tent set by the families of the kidnapped and disappeared in Lebanon near the U.N. headquarters in downtown Beirut, Wednesday, Oct. 23, 2013. (The Daily Star/Hasan Shaaban)

BEIRUT: The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon urged Lebanese authorities Wednesday to work for the release of family members missing since the Civil War, after nine Lebanese kidnapped in Syria were released last week.

“The Lebanese government can work toward releasing our family members if it chooses to,” head of the committee Wadad Helwani, whose husband Adnan was kidnapped during the war, told The Daily Star.

“Our story is much less complicated than that of the nine kidnapped in Syria,” she said, noting the little time it took for officials and mediators to secure their release.

“There isn’t a lack of effort on our part. When the government takes the issue seriously, it can win the release of the kidnapped,” she said.

The committee, formed in 1982 by a group of families whose relatives were kidnapped or forcibly disappeared during the Civil War, released a statement congratulating the released nine and asking officials to boost efforts in their own cases.

“We have felt overwhelming joy and stayed glued to television screens, waiting for the moment the loved ones landed at the airport. We share with them tears of joy for their freedom,” the statement said.

Eleven Shiite Lebanese were kidnapped near Aleppo in May of last year while returning from a pilgrimage in Iran. Two were released a few months later, and the nine others returned to Lebanon last weekend.

“Who knows better than us the pain felt after the loss of a loved one who is kidnapped from his family’s embrace? Is there anyone who knows and appreciates more than we do the joy of reunion after a forced parting?” the statement said.

The committee congratulated the families of the pilgrims, adding that their release was a “great achievement,” which constituted “concrete evidence” that the state was capable of winning the release of the kidnapped individuals.

The committee appealed to President Michel Sleiman and General Security head Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim to give their full attention to the dossier about the wartime disappeared and kidnapped, and to take the matter seriously.

It also called on the government to officially condemn kidnappings, no matter the identity, location or purpose of the abduction, and to punish the offenders.

“We ask our representatives in Parliament, primarily the parliamentary Committee for Human Rights, to discuss the draft law to resolve the issue of missing persons, which has already been drafted with local and international civil society organizations,” the statement said.

The draft law, which outlines a plan aimed at recovering the kidnapped based on Lebanese law and international standards, was created by the committee, along with Act for the Disappeared, a nonprofit organization, a little over a year ago. The draft still has not reached Parliament.

According to Helwani, the committee worked to formulate the draft law for two years.

“We are not asking for miracles,” Helwani said, her voice choked with emotion. “We want our [families] back, alive or dead, and we cannot ask Israel or Syria to do that, we can only ask our government.”

Lynn Maalouf, co-founder of Act for the Disappeared, told The Daily Star the organization would continue pressing for the draft legislation.

“Our position is to get the authorities to take the initiative and to take their responsibilities seriously in order to win the release the detainees,” Maalouf said.

So far, Parliament does not appear to be all that interested in the cases of the disappeared, she added. After the committee drafted the law, no one was invited to discuss the draft with lawmakers.

“Like all other issues in Lebanon, the civil society proposes a solution, but the authorities don’t take it into consideration,” she said.

In terms of the release of the nine Lebanese pilgrims, Maalouf said the matter was a “political” one, which is why it was given so much attention, unlike the issue of the estimated 17,000 who disappeared during the Civil War.

“The issue is not forgotten, but it is being ignored,” she said.

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