

# THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2009 The Daily Star

Wednesday, May 20, 2009

## Hero for cause of missing Lebanese remembered

By Dalila Mahdawi

Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: The families of missing Lebanese gathered on Tuesday to mourn the loss of one of the most vocal activists in their fight to know the fate of their loved ones who went missing in the 1975-90 Civil War. At a special ceremony on Tuesday, friends and family gathered near the ESCWA headquarters to bid a final farewell to Audette Salem and to reiterate their demand for an investigation into those who disappeared during the war.

On September 27, 1985, Salem's two children were kidnapped by one of the many militia groups operating during Lebanon's 1975-1990 Civil War. As Salem would tell her visitors, Richard, 22, and Marie Christine, 19, were taken along with their elderly uncle Georges as they returned home for lunch. Neither was involved in politics, but they were made victims of the war nonetheless.

Salem's pleas with local leaders for information were fruitless; they invariably denied knowledge of her children's whereabouts, blamed rivals, or told her to move on. Around 17,000 people "disappeared" during the Civil War, and there has never been any real investigation into their whereabouts.

But like many other families, Salem refused to abandon her search for the truth. In 2005, a tent was erected outside the ESCWA headquarters in the hopes of pressuring the Lebanese government to find out what happened to their loved ones.

Salem became known as the "rock" of the sit-in, providing a sense of permanence and inspiration for other inhabitants and visitors. She was also the tents' longest resident, giving up the comforts of her home to spend 1,495 days inside the small plastic and canvas abode.

Salem's struggle for the truth was brought to an abrupt and tragic end on Saturday May 16, when a taxi accidentally hit her as she was crossing the road to the tent. Salem had been buying vegetables to prepare a salad for visitors at the tent when she was hit.

After suffering severe blood hemorrhaging, she fell into a coma and died. She was buried Tuesday, aged 77, having come no closer to finding out what happened to her children all those years ago.

"Audette was the guardian of the cause and a mother, sister and friend to all of us," MP Ghassan Mukheiber, a human rights lawyer who has closely followed the struggle of Salem and her tent comrades, said at Tuesday's ceremony.

"Whenever I came down to the tent, I'd find her smoking and I'd tell her it was bad for her health," he recalled, crying.

Others present could barely restrain their anger toward the reluctance of politicians to investigate the issue.

Although Salem is gone, her search will continue. DNA has been collected from her body to ensure that any human remains found in the future can be identified. When that day comes, Audette Salem will finally be able to rest in peace.

# THE DAILY STAR

Copyright (c) 2009 The Daily Star