



Middle East

Lebanon to Form Body to Probe Civil War Disappearances

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FILE - A member of the International Red Cross takes a saliva sample from a woman whose sister went missing in 1976 during the Lebanese civil war, at her home, in a southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, July 11, 2016.

BEIRUT —

Lebanon's parliament on Monday approved the formation of an independent commission to help determine the fate of thousands of people who went missing during the country's civil war, which ended nearly three decades ago.

The long-awaited law would empower an independent national commission to gather information about the missing, collect DNA samples and exhume mass graves from the 1975-1990 conflict.

Families and rights groups have been campaigning for the law since 2012, when it first went to parliament.

“This is the first step toward giving closure to families of the missing hopefully,” said Rona Halabi, spokeswoman for the International Committee for the Red Cross. “This represents a milestone for the families who have waited for years to have answers.”

The Hague-based International Commission on Missing Persons says more than 17,000 people are estimated to have gone missing during the Lebanese civil war.

Lebanon's National News Agency said lawmakers approved the law after voting on each of its 38 articles.

LBC TV said lawmakers initially protested, saying calls for accountability may affect current officials. The broadcaster said they were reassured the 1991 amnesty for abuses committed by militias during the war remains in place.

Many of Lebanon's political parties are led by former warlords implicated in some of the civil war's worst fighting.

“For the first time after the war, Lebanon enters a genuine reconciliation phase, to heal the wounds and give families the right to know,” Gebran Bassil, the country's foreign minister tweeted.

The ICRC began compiling biological reference samples, to be used to extract DNA samples, from relatives of the disappeared in 2016 and has interviewed more than 2,000 families to help a future national commission.

The samples have been stored with the ICRC. The law may allow Lebanese security forces to take part in the sample collection and storage.