

Lebanon

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PM dismisses criticism from rights group

Amnesty says panel on 'missing' has no teeth

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Prime Minister Salim Hoss scoffed at Amnesty International on Thursday for suggesting that a new government commission – responsible for determining the fate of those who disappeared during the civil war – had neither the independence nor the power to accomplish its mandate.

"There is absolutely no basis for the organization's doubts. We appointed security officials who have direct access to any information that can be found on this issue," Hoss told The Daily Star.

The government set up a panel of five army intelligence officers last week to learn what had happened to over 17,000 people who disappeared between 1975 and 1990. It is to report its findings to Hoss within three months.

"What is worrying is the lack of independence of the membership of this commission, the lack of terms of reference and the exceedingly short reporting time frame," the London-based human-rights group said in a statement.

However, Hoss defended Amnesty's claims by saying that the appointed officials were "very objective and neutral."

Regarding the short time frame, the premier said: "We set a time frame so that work on the investigation is done quickly. If there is a need to extend this period, we will."

According to Amnesty, 17,415 people went missing in the civil war. Some were held by militias in Lebanon and others transferred to prisons in Syria and Israel, it said. The government

Committee for the Relatives of the Kidnapped and Missing to discover their fate. The group hold vigils near the premises of the weekly Cabinet meeting.

Relatives spokeswoman Wadad Halwani, who has led a campaign to pressure the government since October 1999, said she considered the government's appointment of such a committee a positive step.

"This is the first time since 1982 that the government officially recognizes our right to know and takes serious steps in that direction," she said.

However, Halwani and other relatives are not taking any chances and will await results before taking decisions regarding future action.

"The government fulfilled one part of the first of our three basic



Relatives of the missing demonstrate outside Cabinet sessions

committee which would seriously look into the fate of the kidnapped. We will remain cautious about the government's decision until we see something tangible," Halwani said.

Amnesty urged the government to appoint neutral members to the commission and give them powers to uncover the truth.

"The commission of inquiry should be composed of men and women known for their integrity and impartial judgment," it said. "The commission should have the necessary powers from the government to conduct an effective investi-

have unrestricted access to any site where there may be remains of the disappeared."

In response, Hoss said officials appointed by the government do have the necessary powers and unrestricted access.

"We're serious regarding this issue and we appointed the people who are qualified to do this job," he declared.

Many inheritance cases are stalled in court because those who disappeared have not been declared dead. Under a 1995 law, families can obtain a document saying missing relatives are dead, but some

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