
Red Cross Collecting Samples to ID Missing From Lebanon War

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A member of the International Committee for the Red Cross takes a saliva sample from Zeinab Ali Wehbe, sister of Habib Ali Wehbe who went missing in 1976 during the Lebanese civil war, at her home, in the southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, Monday, July 11, 2016. The ICRC is collecting biological samples from families of those missing in Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war in efforts to encourage the country's government to solve thousands of disappearances from that era. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

BEIRUT — Habib Wehbe disappeared in 1976, in the first year of Lebanon's 15-year civil war. He was 25 years old, young and politically engaged — a contributing writer to the Lebanese Communist Party's flagship newspaper and a secondary school teacher in the capital's suburbs.

Forty years later and still missing, his bereaved sisters are now providing DNA samples to the International Committee for the Red Cross as part of an initiative that the organization hopes will encourage Lebanon's government to solve thousands of disappearances dating back to the country's civil war.

"My mother looked for him every day for six years," said his sister Zeinab Wehbe in her apartment in Beirut's crowded Ghobeiry neighborhood. "She looked everywhere — every mosque, every church, every police station, hospital, and school."

Wehbe's friends told his family they had last seen him in Beirut's working class eastern suburbs, which were the center stage for many of the massacres and sectarian cleansing that came to define the first two years of the war.

For the Wehbe family, and for thousands of others in Lebanon, that search was and remains to this day a futile one, chasing ghosts in a country that has still not healed from the scars of the war.

After 15 years of shifting alliances and destructive foreign interventions, the war was not so much resolved as it was settled, its surviving warlords dividing up the country's top political posts. Successive governments have failed to open official inquiries into the fates of thousands of those who disappeared.

Now, the ICRC has started collecting biological samples from the families of the missing, a step that will allow for the extraction of DNA and identification of human remains if and when a national commission is formed by the government.

The presumption is that the bodies of the thousands who disappeared could someday be found in yet undiscovered mass graves, burial sites or even just scattered across the country.

ICRC has interviewed 2,500 families of disappeared persons, and says it plans to collect samples from all of them over the next year.

"Our goal is to help the victims of the civil war," said ICRC spokesman Tarek Wheibe.

On Monday, three of Habib Wehbi's younger sisters — Zeinab, Umalbanean, and Amina — offered forensic evidence to the International Committee for the Red Cross. It was the first time they were approached in 40 years for a sample that could someday help investigators identify their missing brother.

One by one, the sisters — adolescents when Habib disappeared, now adult women, mothers and aunts — allowed ICRC technicians to swab their cheeks and gums for saliva samples, which will be stored at the international organization's laboratories and Lebanon's national police force for a time when the government opens its investigations into the war.

"We are doing the government's work, but there is only so much we can do," said Wheibe. "There is a bill to authorize a national investigation into the disappeared with the parliament. If it is passed, then the work we do today will help investigators to move forward as quickly as possible."

For the sisters, they know there is little possibility of finding their brother alive, but still they seek some closure.

"Even if we can just recover his bones, then we can bury him with the family," said Zeinab.
