



"You are the light of my eyes": Families of the disappeared gather to remember at Martyrs Square

Tears and symbolism mark civil war commemoration

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Lebanon marked the 25th anniversary of the outbreak of civil war on Thursday with officials and relatives of kidnap victims thronging to Martyrs' Square to lament the fate of those who are still missing.

The general mood was one of firm commitment to postwar unity, though some wounds, especially the unknown fate of the missing, continue to bleed.

"You are the light of my eyes," shrieked Khadijeh Ali Wehbe, addressing her missing son who disappeared in 1976. "What did he see of life? Look at all of them. They were children," she sobbed, beating her head with her hands.

"He wasn't armed. They just opened the door and took him, the light of my life. He was 17."

More than 1,000 people gathered as dusk fell on the square, the once-vibrant city center

now reduced to a desolate parking lot. Many wore navy blue ribbons in honor of the missing.

"Knowing that they're dead is better than not knowing at all," said Fathiyeh Ismail, whose son Ahmad, was 25 when he disappeared 20 years ago. "My husband waited for my beautiful boy to come back home. He died waiting," she sobbed. "I'm old and sick but I want to see my boy before I die."

"My sister Samia was studying to be a doctor in Moscow. Beirut Airport was closed so she had to go by way of Damascus," recalled Yusra Mohammed Mahmoud. "We were living in the Cite Sportive at the time and she took a taxi with three others to get to Syria. The Lebanese Forces took all four of them at the Museum crossing.

"That was in 1982 and she was 22 years old. The last we heard of her was six years ago after we gave a lot of money to a lawyer to find her whereab-

outs," she said. The only information he could get was that she had been knocked unconscious after her kidnapping.

Mothers of the missing huddled together with lit candles. "We want to know," they shouted in unison.

Amnesty International has estimated that there are around 17,000 people missing because of the Lebanese civil war, which claimed 150,000 lives.

Several people complained about the rough treatment they received from riot police during their demonstration outside the Cabinet building on Wednesday.

"Every week they push us some more," said Adel Burji whose brother disappeared in 1976. The Committee for the Families of the Kidnapped and Missing During the War hold weekly sit-ins outside the Cabinet building to pressure the government to investigate the whereabouts of the missing.

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Tears and symbolism at the Square

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"And what about the prisoners in Syrian jails? Why isn't anyone asking about them?" a distraught mother shouted in the square.

Earlier in the day, Sidon MP Bahiya Hariri organized a rally in Nijmeh Square. Hundreds, led by MPs, signed a petition reiterating their faith in a free and independent Lebanon.

Representatives of President Emile Lahoud, Speaker Nabih Berri and Prime Minister Salim Hoss were on hand, as was former premier Rafik Hariri.

"Unity is baptized in blood," said Hariri. "The civil war has ... become a relic of the past."

He maintained that the bombed-out vestiges of the war be torn down. "Not a single building should be kept as it is to remind us of the civil war. There is no need to preserve this painful memory."

Bahiya Hariri released dozens of white doves as a symbol of the return of life to a part of the city which had witnessed so much bloodshed.

"Setting this occasion 25 years after the beginning of the civil war reflects our determination to live. All Lebanese refuse to go back to the past and are aware that their unity is a priority," she said.