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"To be fair, favor the weak before the strong, and return the rights to the people:" Families of the disappeared at the Press Federation

## Families of the disappeared demand action

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Daily Star staff

Buoyed by campaigns to free detainees held by Israel, the families of 17,000 kidnap victims missing since the civil war launched their own lobbying Friday, demanding that the government shed light on the fate of their loved ones.

Scores of people gathered at the Press Federation for the campaign, entitled It's Our Right to Know. The movement attracted the support of several MPs - Metn's Nassib Lahoud, Beirut's Jamil Shammas, Baalbek-Hermel Marwan Fares and Zghorta's Nayla Mouawad. The lawmakers joined relatives of the missing in signing a petition

calling for President Emile Lahoud's support.

Albert Abi Azar, president of the Friends of the Families Committee described the campaign's mission: "We should apologize to mothers and wives for our delay in helping," he said.

"Starting today," he said, "through peaceful actions, we

will pressure the government to grant the families of the kidnapped their rights.

Abi Azar noted that more than 160 non-governmental organizations, student groups and labor unions have pledged their support.

Wadad Halawani, who heads

the Families of the Wartime Kidnapped and Missing Committee, said that the campaign hoped to achieve three goals.

- The government should form an official fact-finding committee to investigate the whereabouts of those who were kidnapped during the war;

- The government should

provide social care for the families of the kidnapped;

- The government should make April 13 the "Day for the Memory of the Kidnapped" and erect a memorial to these and other victims of the war.

Halawani's group was founded in 1982 to represent

the families of kidnap victims of all religious confessions. Despite their efforts to determine the whereabouts of their missing relatives, little progress has been made.

"Who is supposed to locate my husband?" Halawani asked. "If I could have done this by myself by now, I would have."

Her husband, a history teacher, was kidnapped from their home in Ras al-Nabaa in 1982. Her two sons, Ziad and Ghassan, are active committee members.

Though Halawani said that the members of the current government were "the ministers least accountable for the war," she maintained that they were responsible for ending

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# Families of the disappeared

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the suffering of the kidnapped and their families.

"The new administration promised to be fair, favor the weak before the strong and return the rights to the people," she said. "We, the families and our loved ones, are part of this country and the government's responsibility."

During the war years, three government committees were formed to investigate the kidnappings. The results of their inquiries were never disclosed.

Halawani said that the families of the kidnapped were entitled to the same government support given to the families of detainees in Israeli prisons. Detainees' families receive financial and medical assistance from the Council of the South, a state-run institution established to support these families.

"Officials claim that helping us will cost them a lot. How do they know if they haven't even counted us?" Halawani asked.

"We're not beggars. We are entitled to our rights," she added.

Mouawad, whose husband was assassinated after his election as president, agreed, saying: "I'm a war victim myself and we can't pretend that the war never happened."

She stressed the importance of creating a national memorial, demanding that a monument bearing the names of war victims be built.

"Establishing the memorial is a must to help people remember," she said.

Fares invited Halawani and members of her group to attend the next meeting of his parliamentary committee on human rights.

"I feel better already, knowing that more and more people are ready to hear us out and support our cause," Halawani said.

The families and their supporters will hold a sit-in outside Cabinet headquarters in Mathaf every Wednesday at 4pm. However, next week, there will also be a demonstration on Thursday.