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Society

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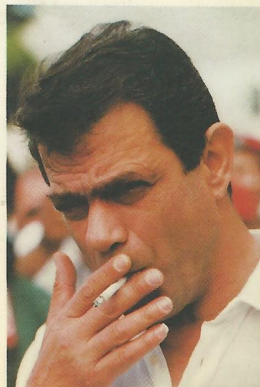
Air Pollution

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Elham Halabi
Creation in Design

Najah Wakim
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Ghassan Mawla
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Wadad Halwani

Officials Refuse To Look Into The Fate of More Than 16,000 Kidnapped During The Civil War

Wadad Halwani member and founder of the committee for the relatives of the kidnapped and detained people in Lebanon talks to Society about the committee's efforts and future plans.

Society: Tell us please how this committee was first formed?

Wadad Halwani: The Committee for the Relatives of the Kidnapped and Detained in Lebanon, was formed in October 1982. When my husband Adnan was kidnapped in September 24, 1982, I was one of the contributors who formed this committee. We were a group of women because at the time men were being kidnapped.

How was your husband kidnapped?

Two gunmen in civilian outfit, kidnapped him from our home in Ras Nabeh under the pretext that they were taking him for inquisition about a car accident which he did not make in the first place.

How did you proceed with the formation of the committee?

I thought about looking for some people who had the same case instead of being alone in the search. I believed that if we were a group of people, we could have put more pressure and make a difference. Officials used to tell me that there were plenty of people who had the same case. So through Radio Voice of Arab Lebanon (Sawt Loubnane Al-Araby) I called upon the relatives of the kidnapped for a gathering in Korniche Al-Mazraa. When I got there I was really surprised to see over one hundred women waiting. So we decided that same day and without previous planning to go and see the then Prime Minister, Shafic Al-Wazzan. We marched

from Korniche Al-Mazraa to Sanayeh.

Did you face any problems with security elements?

We did, but our inner pain kept us moving and we succeeded after long negotiations and struggle with security forces to meet the Premier. Fifteen women were allowed to enter the palace. Although the prime minister expressed deep concern and understanding to our problem, however no serious action was taken. These fifteen women were the nucleus of the committee. I was one of them.

Tell us more about your case?

I refuse to talk about my own case because I am part of a general cause, especially since I am concerned with other people's case. My own problem has become a part of their case. All of us are part of the same problem.

What has happened to Adnan?

He is still kidnapped.

Do you still believe he will be back some day?

My personal hope is very slim because he has been kidnapped fifteen years ago. However, I am still exerting my full efforts to search for him since I did not receive a clear answer that he is dead. Our committee is still fighting for the right to know the fate of these people, whether they are dead or alive. The fate of thousands of kidnapped is still unknown.

What is the exact number of those kidnapped in Lebanon?

Some reports estimate the number to be between 16 or 17 thousand. But the list



of our committee contains about 2,500 names.

Has the committee succeeded in finding back any of the 2,500?

Unfortunately, those detained were being released through an exchange policy conducted among different parties and militias. Those who were not members of militias remained detained.

Do you think your committee has achieved some of its goals?

It has only one goal and that is to gain back our beloved ones who were kidnapped during the civil war in our country.

As Head of the Ministerial Affairs Department at the Prime Minister's office, do you think your job with the Premiership could affect your case in a positive way?

I have always concentrated my efforts on the general cause of our committee. We tried to stress the whole issue as a humanitarian, social and national affair. I have never taken advantage of my position at a governmental institution to the benefit of my husband's case.

Do you think however, that you can be more influential from your position at this governmental institution?

Our committee is trying for the past three



months to meet the Prime Minister, and we did not get the chance till now. This example gives you a hint of the relationship between my job and our cause. This shows how concerned officials are in our cause.
Is your job at the governmental institution subjecting you to pressure?

Even if I was put under pressure I would never freeze my efforts and forget such a humanitarian case.

Did the government form any commission to inquire about the fate of the kidnapped?
 We were always faced with promises and

negligence. A committee was formed but without success, their efforts reached a dead end. So we were again faced with promises and more promises. This was a way of ignoring the issue. In 1993, we presented the Lebanese key leaders a memorandum in which we stressed the need for our government to investigate seriously the status of those kidnapped. The memo suggested that those found should be released and those still missing should be declared dead by the government itself.

What has become of this memo?

The memo was completely ignored from 1993 till 1995. Definitely our committee was making the necessary follow-up which was encountered with failure. In 1995, a bill was issued in which the kidnapped were described as 'missing people'. Therefore, instead of reaching a solution, the government forced the relatives of the kidnapped to carry the full responsibility of pronouncing the death of their loved ones. They called upon the relatives to get an official death certificate, as if this piece of paper would cool down our anguish and resolve our cases.

What was your reaction to this bill?

We announced our protest and objection in a press conference. We are better off without such a bill which undermines our efforts and closes the door on our cause.

What were the measures taken to protest against the bill?

We followed up the issue with a number of officials, but unfortunately it seems that the key leaders refuse to deal with the matter. They are simply declining to meet us.

Do you think you have to take other measures?

Maybe we need to protest and demonstrate as we did the first time to meet the Prime Minister. Maybe this is the only way to draw their attention and concern. We are only armed with our will to know the fate of our beloved ones. One high-ranking official accused us of attempting to shake the national stability. But we have the full right to know about the fate of our relatives who were kidnapped many years ago. We used to believe that when the civil war ends the whole matter would be clarified, but this was not the case. We tried to find a reasonable solution, but the government did not respond properly. We just need to know the truth. It is our right to keep on protesting until our demands are met, and the true answer is given. However, if they will keep on ignoring our call we will definitely try other means of action. And

when we die, our children will take up the cause.

Is there any specific action you are planning to take in the near future?

During the Pope's coming visit to Lebanon, we are planning to address a written memo to His Holiness Pope John Paul II urging him to help us in our cause.

Did you get in touch international human rights associations?

Actually we made contacts with the United Nations' Human Rights' Committee in Geneva, Amnesty International and the Red Cross. We also attended and took part in international conferences and seminars.

What was their response?

We received more support from these associations than we did here. They even sent memos to Lebanese officials. And what was the reply of the Lebanese authority?

The same response we always get. Recently an envoy from the International Federation of Human Rights visited Beirut in the aim to investigate into the matter. The three key leaders refused to see her. Lebanese officials grab any occasion to express their support to human rights, but when it comes to reality and action, they forget about their vows and promises. Even local associations whose aim is to defend human rights, did not exert any effort in support.

Did you receive any assistance from these local associations?

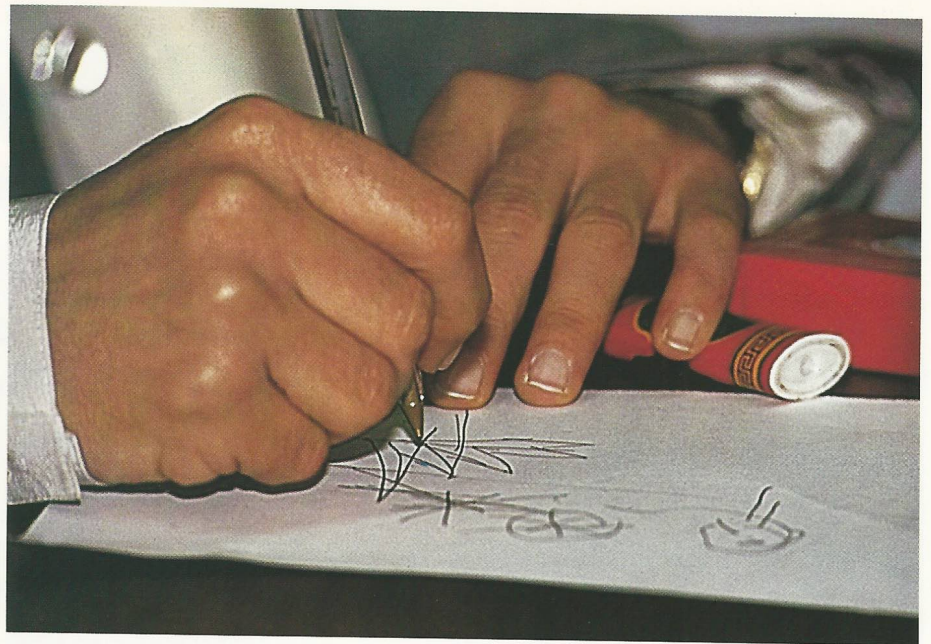
They hadn't even contacted us to express their moral support.

Is the committee still meeting very often?

At the beginning the meetings were intensive. We used to convene more regularly. We have to take into consideration the indifference and lies we faced as well as the number of years passed. But I can assure you that nothing will make us stop searching for the truth.

Is your committee also concerned about the detainees in Israeli prisons?

We are only involved with the cases of those kidnapped in Lebanon.



Do you think the government had differentiated between your case and that of those detained in Israeli prisons?

The government is offering a monthly salary to the family of those imprisoned by Israel. This is not the case with the families of those kidnapped in Lebanon although we asked for medical and educational assistance for the needy families.

Why do you think the government is not responding to your call for the fate of the kidnapped?

It seems that warlords are the same lords of peace. Consequently, those who were responsible for the kidnapping are now in top ranks. We are only asking for a straight answer. I cannot find another justification for not responding to our calls. In war time, they used to justify their indifference by claiming that the government was still not in control of all its territories. But I don't know what is their excuse now.

*Interview by Mona Honein
Photography by Anis Hammoud*

