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## RIGHTS-LEBANON: Search Begins For Persons Missing During War

By Kim Ghattas

**BEIRUT, Jan 28 (IPS) - The Lebanese government has announced the formation of an official committee to investigate the whereabouts of 17,000 who disappeared during the 1975-1990 war in Lebanon. Although most are believed to be dead, relatives still hope to hear the truth about what happened.**

The move, announced early this week, is the first of its kind in Lebanon where previous committees set up during the war did not have official prerogatives and did not come out with any results.

The statement released by the prime minister's office Tuesday announced the formation of a special committee, made of five representatives from the country's different security organisations, from army to internal security. The committee will have to report back within three months.

"In the 18 years I have been searching, fighting for the truth, this is the first ray of light I see," says Wadad Helwani, who set up the 'Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared' (CFKD) in 1982, after her husband was abducted from his home in Beirut, in the midst of the Israeli siege of the western sector of the city.

The government's decision is believed to be a direct result of the campaign launched in November by the Friends Committee (FC), which was set up to mobilise the support of individuals and organisations wanting to assist the CFKD in its campaign.

Entitled "It is our right to know", the campaign relied on weekly sit-ins staged in front of the ministers council, where mainly women would stand with pictures of their lost relatives and banners with the campaign's motto. On their way into the cabinet meeting, several ministers would stop and take the pamphlet handed out by the campaigners.

Lebanese president, Emile Lahoud, who has until now evaded a meeting with the committees despite their incessant request, was also flooded with an estimated 6,000 letters, individually signed by supporters of the campaign and faxed to the presidential palace.

"I think the campaign became an embarrassment for the government, because the parents of the disappeared have a legitimate right to find out about their relatives, a right which cannot be ignored," says Michael Young, a local political analyst.

"The fact that such a committee has been appointed is in itself a victory, but I doubt they will come up with much new," he adds.

Since the end of the Lebanese war ten years ago, there has been little effort to seek the truth of what happened to those who disappeared during the fighting. In part, because several warlords, directly or indirectly, responsible for the lives of those 17,000 have become ministers or members of parliament. An amnesty law was also passed in 1991 granting immunity to

those who had been involved in the violence.

"We hoped that this law would encourage the people who had been involved in kidnappings to come forth, clean their conscience and shed the light on the whereabouts of our relatives, knowing that they would not be sentenced in court," says Mona Hashishou, whose father was taken from his home in south Lebanon in 1982.

Hashishou personally knows the abductors of her father and her family is suing them in court. She says the court case is mainly to get them to say what they know about her father.

Although few will admit it openly, it is most probable that most of the disappeared have died. It is unlikely that any are still held in obscure basements in Lebanon, but many of those kidnapped are believed to be in detention, either in Syria or in Israel. Or at least, this is the hope that some relatives cling to, desperately waiting for the return of their loved ones.

The uncertainty not only eats away at the hearts of the relatives of the disappeared, but also hinders matters of inheritance and the like. Although law passed in 1995 made it easier for people to declare disappeared as dead to facilitate such legal affairs, few relatives opted for what they said was equivalent to killing their loved ones.

Young does not expect the committee to go deep into the details of each case and it will state as a conclusion that no survivors were found, without saying boldly that they are dead.

"We don't know what to expect from this committee, we have hoped several times and learnt to be cautious, but we still hope to hear the truth," says Helwani.

The campaigners will hold a press conference this week to announce the committees' next moves.

"This is just the beginning, it all starts now. This is the first step towards achieving the demands of our campaign. We will not just go home now and wait," says Helwani, adding that they would stay at the disposal of the investigation committee with all the information they have on the disappeared. But also to ensure that things are done properly.

In addition to their demand for an investigation, the campaigners are asking for assistance for relatives of the disappeared. They have also requested that April 13, the first day of war in Lebanon in 1975, be a day to the memory of the disappeared, "so that our children never forget".(END/IPS/kg/mn/00)