

Nov. 13, 2018 | 10:27 PM

Parliament passes law on disappeared

Timour Azhari | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Lawmakers Monday endorsed a landmark law creating a national commission to investigate the whereabouts of thousands of Lebanese citizens forcibly disappeared during the Civil War (1975-90), in a legislative session that saw MPs churn through draft bills.

Parliament also endorsed \$430 million in spending for Electricite du Liban to buy fuel for Lebanon's power plants, after a rise in fuel prices this year caused the preallocated \$1.4 billion in funding to run out.

The session ended around 10 p.m. and a second session planned for Tuesday was abandoned after all items on the agenda were addressed.

MPs also endorsed a raft of laws related to health care and infrastructure projects, including \$30 million in loans from the Islamic Development Bank for the health care sector, and further IDB loans to expand Tripoli's port. Late at night, MPs approved a two-year operating contract with Electricite de Zahle based on a proposal from caretaker Energy Minister Cesar Abi Khalil. The contract would effectively keep EDZ supplying electricity to Zahle residents for two years without renewing EDZ's concession, which was a controversial measure.

Abi Khalil is set to hold a news conference on the matter at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday.

The law on the forcibly disappeared saw a divisive debate in Parliament, with many MPs registering objections, including specifically to Article 37.

The article aims to hold accountable those found to be involved in the disappearances, of which there are around 17,000.

Progressive Socialist Party MP Akram Chehayeb said the bill could lead to increased political strife in the country. "I don't know why we want to open all the graves that were closed," he said. PSP MP Bilal Abdullah warned that the article could lead to the indictment of ministers, MPs and officials.

Lebanese Forces MP George Oqeis also objected, claiming the article “shows the real intentions behind this law.” This was in apparent reference to LF members’ involvement in the disappearances that could be targeted by the article, in a law that was partially drafted by Hikmat Deeb, an MP with the LF’s rival, the Free Patriotic Movement.

Other lawmakers expressed their support for the law. When Future MP Hadi Hobeish objected to extra spending on the commission, MP Paula Yacoubian hit back that “a million dollars” to clear the minds of families with missing loved ones was worth it.

Tashnag MP Hagop Pakradounian agreed, as did the FPM and Kataeb blocs.

A motion to refer the law back to parliamentary committees for further study failed. Then, an article-by-article vote was held leading up to its passage.

Soon after, Wadad Halawani, the founder of the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, was seen walking out of the portion of the chamber reserved for visitors in tears.

“Thirty-six years I’ve been working toward this. I don’t know what to say,” she told The Daily Star.

The session, headed by Speaker Nabih Berri, ran from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., with a roughly three-hour break in the afternoon. Throughout, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri asked Berri to remove pieces of legislation from the 38-item agenda on the basis that some were incomplete and others were not urgent. Other times he did not justify the move, in total causing over 15 laws to be removed. Berri referred another seven back to parliamentary committees for further study.

Lawmakers in the morning session endorsed an item that provides funding to buy drugs for cancer patients and those with chronic diseases. Caretaker Finance Minister Ali Hasan Khalil objected, saying lawmakers had not determined from where the roughly \$50 million would come and that the ministry would be forced to take out a loan.

To this, Finance and Budget Committee Chair MP Ibrahim Kanaan said it was the government’s responsibility to secure the bill’s funding, since it had been put forward by the Health Ministry.

It was passed with widespread reservations from MPs. Hasbani said in a tweet following the morning session that 26,000 patients would benefit from the bill.

When speaking of the extra spending, MP Hasan Fadlallah noted that, instead of long-term policies, the state left matters up to the last minute when conditions were so bad that Parliament had no choice but to endorse bills. “This is a kind of blackmailing of citizens,” he said. Hasan Khalil at one point remarked that there was an overreliance on extra-budgetary spending. “It’s as if we are saying that we plan out the budget over months and set detailed ceilings for spending, and then we go on and spend as much as we want.”

Contrary to custom, the session was calm on the political front, likely because Berri had asked MPs to avoid speaking about the Cabinet formation crisis, well into its sixth month. Still, in the initial general debate that lasted for over an hour, the lack of a government was by far the most mentioned topic. MP Anwar Khalil remarked: “We live in a state with no state.” MPs Yacoubian and Sami Gemayel reiterated calls for a government of experts to be formed given the political deadlock and grave economic situation.

Yacoubian also called for an urgent session to announce a state of environmental emergency. “What are we waiting for? We have the highest rate of metastasis under 40 years old in the world,” she said. Berri said he would note her proposal.

In a more lighthearted moment, MP Salim Aoun asked Berri where he could place his grievances over the fact that Zahle’s dangerous Dahr al-Baidar road, which connects the coast to the Bekaa, remains without lighting. Berri pointed to the sky, saying “To God,” eliciting a laugh from MPs.

In the evening session, MP Eddy Demerjian spoke for an elongated period of time in French, leading Berri to snap: “Arretez,” or “stop,” in French.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on November 13, 2018, on page 2