

2000-726-0009a-2



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS BEIRUT

FAX

FROM : ZEINA KARAMTO : Mrs. Wadad HalwaniDATE : 26/7/00PAGES NBR : 2

2000 07 26 - 000 9b - n

^BC-Lebanon-War Missing

^Lebanese government declares 17,000 war missing dead<

^By SAM F. GHATTAS=

^Associated Press Writer=

BEIRUT, Lebanon (AP) _ A government-appointed commission looking into the fate of thousands of people missing during the 1975-90 civil war has declared that they are all to be considered dead.

Closing the books on the fate of an estimated 17,000 Lebanese who went missing during the war, a condensed version of the commission's findings published Wednesday called on their families to begin the paperwork to obtain death certificates.

"The commission considers that all the kidnapped and missing who have disappeared for four years or more and whose bodies have not been found are to be considered deceased," said the report.

Relatives of the missing refused to accept the findings.

"We're still looking for him," Zahira Burji said, referring to her brother Kazem Burji, who was kidnapped in the eastern Bekaa Valley in 1976 at the age of 23.

"We have not found a body. Maybe he is in another country. Our hopes rest with God," the 43-year-old veiled Shiite Muslim woman added, clutching a portrait of her brother in one hand and a handkerchief in the other to wipe her tears.

Burji was one of two dozen relatives staging a sit-in outside Parliament in downtown Beirut to protest the findings.

The relatives, most of them veiled Muslim women, wept as they held pictures of their missing loved ones. Some vented their anger at politicians arriving for a legislative session, hurling insults at them. Security forces did not intervene.

"May God burn your souls as ours were burned," a woman shouted.

Wadad Halwani, who heads a group of relatives following up on the fate of the missing, said Wednesday its committee will consider its next move after absorbing "the shock" of the report.

"We have been weeping for 25 years. Enough. We want the truth," she said, adding that among the actions considered is a demand that the government release the commission's full report so all details of the seven-month investigation would be known.

During the civil war, Christian and Muslim militias kidnapped people from different sects to kill them in revenge or to trade them for kidnapped co-religionists. About 150,000 people were killed and half a million displaced during the 15-year conflict, which wreaked destruction estimated at dlr 25 billion in this country of 3.5 million.

The disappearances were a constant reminder of the war and have shackled families with legal obstacles in matters of inheritance and marriage.

Prime Minister Salim Hoss expressed sympathy "and understanding for the painful echo the results of the study" will have on the families. "I see no way but to admit the truth and accept it, no matter how bitter it is," he said in a statement

2000-726-0009C-2

RTT3563 Page 2 07-26-2000 10:27

issued late Tuesday.

The report said the commission investigated the cases of 2,046 missing people whose families had filled out questionnaires.

It carried out field inspections and unearthed mass graves of unidentified people. It also checked with the International Committee of the Red Cross about the fate of 216 Lebanese believed held by Israel, and inquired with Syrian authorities about 168 missing Lebanese whose families believe are jailed in Syria. The commission said the ICRC reported 17 were jailed in Israel, and Syrian authorities said none were on Syrian territory.

The commission said it based its decision on some of the following factors:

- Civil war militias conducted "bilateral physical liquidations" and buried bodies in mass graves. Some bodies were thrown into the Mediterranean Sea and positive medical identification was not possible due to the corpses' deterioration.

- Religious civil status code considers a person dead if he disappeared in conditions considered fatal and his body was not found for four years.