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Unconsolable: After years, sometimes decades, of seeking the return of their loved ones, relatives of the kidnapped cannot take in a government decision that they should be considered dead

Kidnap relatives refuse to accept 'death by decree'

Ranwa Yehia
Daily Star staff

It did not take much for the families of those kidnapped and missing during the war to express their angry refusal of a government decision to consider their loved ones dead.

Mothers carrying enlarged pictures of their children wailed and screamed in frustration, refusing to accept the bitter reality. Many recounted the incidents leading to their relatives' disappearance, the many leads collected or discovered throughout the years that indicated their loved ones were still alive.

"They are all alive, they all exist," screamed Zeinab Barji, banging her fist repeatedly on the podium in the Press Federation hall where the families gathered on Friday to express their position on the government's decision.

"No, this is not the end. I will continue to stand in front of government departments carrying my son's picture and demanding his return," shouted another woman.

Relatives, friends and sympathizers stood silently watching. Nothing could be done except to allow the families to vent their anguish – a culmination of years of suffering.

Shiite spiritual leader Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah called on the government to organize a mass funeral for the missing and kidnapped and

demanding that the warlords responsible for the kidnappings be prosecuted.

Those who took the difficult but realistic option to accept the government's decision stood out. Dressed in black in recognition that their loved ones have been declared dead, these few mothers comforted those who, along the years, have become their partners in struggle.

Among them was Wadad Halwani, who has led a campaign since the late 80s to discover the fate of the thousands

'I'll continue to carry my son's photo and seek his return'

of missing and kidnapped during the war. In a highly-emotional speech that reduced the audience of 100 to tears, Halwani announced that she had finally allowed herself to become a widow, 18 years after her husband's disappearance.

"Today, I wear black in mourning. It has been 18 years since Adnan, my husband, love and father of my two sons, disappeared. He is not alive and there is no grave we can visit," she said. Halwani said that although she felt deep sorrow, "I have to admit that, today, I'm much

more comforted than during the thousands of days of waiting, struggling and uncertainty."

"I hope you understand my feelings and I hope, from the heart, that you feel the same way now, because I want you, too, to let go and be at ease," Halwani said.

Remembering the years she and the families struggled to exert pressure on the different governments to determine the fate of the missing, Halwani described how they were continuously faced with silence and broken promises.

Halwani described the efforts made for more than a year by the Committee of the Families of those Missing and Kidnapped during the war, through staging weekly sit-ins in front of Cabinet headquarters and following up the work of the investigative commission set up to determine the fate of the missing.

"We stood united, supporting each other, wiping each other's tears and vowing to continue to struggle whatever the price, until we finally demanded that the government announce the report produced by the commission," she said.

Prime Minister Salim Hoss on Tuesday announced the details of the report which considered those who were kidnapped or missing for at least four years to be dead.

Hoss, Halwani stressed, kept his promise.

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Tears from kidnap relatives

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"It's true that the report's results were harsh and painful. It's true that the shock we faced has not yet subsided, but we have to admit that the premier is not responsible for that," she said.

The whimpers and moans of pain that were intermittently heard in the background increased. Some mothers bent over, buried their faces in both hands and wept.

Trying hard to maintain her composure, Halwani continued: "We have to admit that the premier had the courage to tackle one of the most complex and difficult cases from the remnants of the war. We have to appreciate what he did after the neglect we received from all the previous governments. We also have to admit that the decision that was made is a historic accomplishment for our benefit."

"We thank you, prime minister, from the mind, because our heart is in pain," she said.

However, Halwani said she and the families were in dire need to hear Hoss' expressions

of sympathy, "to hear your voice and see your face instead of hearing or reading your statement on television and in newspapers, as if the issue was just another news article of a kidnapping that took place in another continent."

Halwani urged every family member who is dissatisfied with the report to contact Brigadier Salim Abu Ismail, who headed the investigative commission, and get the necessary details. While the campaign, "We have the Right to Know," was announced as over, Halwani said the committee's work had not ended as there were still several demands to be achieved.

One of the major demands is that the government implement a social rehabilitation project for the families, as proposed by the committee. Two other demands are considering April 13, which is the anniversary of the beginning of the civil war, a national day in memory of the kidnapped, and setting up a memorial which families can visit.

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