

Families of the disappeared push for answers



Leila Hatoum/IRIN

Families showing photographs of their missing relatives to MP Ibrahim Kanaan with pamphlets asking

BEIRUT

The parents of Lebanese nationals still detained in Syrian jails and of those who went missing during the civil war protested in front of the parliament building on Tuesday, demanding an international commission to investigate the fate of their loved ones. According to the NGO Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE), hundreds of Lebanese citizens are still languishing in Syrian prisons, with some detainees reportedly having been held since 1991. A total of about 17,000 Lebanese are believed to have gone missing during the civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, many of whom may have been killed and buried in mass graves or handed over to belligerents in the war, such as Israel and Syria. Protestors met several government ministers and MPs, to whom they delivered a memorandum demanding parliamentary pressure on Syria for the “immediate release” of their family members and information on their whereabouts. While Damascus has consistently denied the presence of Lebanese detainees in its prisons, two Lebanese were among a group of Arab prisoners released from Syrian jails in 2004. The memorandum went on to urge the government to request that the UN establish an international commission to look into the issue, establish a national committee

to look into possible mass graves and to perform necessary DNA identification tests. Parents also denounced the so-called Joint Syrian-Lebanese Commission, established last year to look into the matter, saying that it had been unable to arrive at any conclusions due to a lack of Syrian cooperation. According to one anonymous official involved in the joint inquiry, the commission's main tasks are to confirm that "no innocent Syrians are held in Lebanese prisons and to verify if there are Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons, as their parents claim". MP Ibrahim Kanaan, who met with many of the parents of the disappeared, took the case to parliament, where house speaker Nabih Berri assured him the matter would be raised in the next parliamentary session, scheduled to begin in October. During Tuesday's session, parliamentarian and human rights activist Ghassan Mokhaiber also demanded that the Cabinet respond to outstanding questions about the case. "I sent my questions to the Cabinet over a month and a half ago," said Mokhaiber. "So far, I haven't received an answer." According to Mokhaiber, his questions had touched on the joint commission's progress, the government's official stand on those missing from the civil war period and Lebanese citizens detained in Syria and Israel.

LH/AR/AM