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LEBANON

Civil War an open wound on 37th anniversary of conflict

The Daily Star



Relatives of those who went missing during the war gather to demand the truth about their fate.

BEIRUT: Lebanon marked the anniversary of the Civil War Friday with politicians urging the country to move forward in the right direction, and activists demanding convincing answers about the past.

A group of over 100 people gathered in Downtown Beirut to repeat their demands for the truth behind the thousands of people who went missing during Lebanon's 1975-90 Civil War.

"After 37 years, we still want to know the fate of our families ... [and of those] who disappeared in the war," said Wadad Halwani, the organizer of the rally held at Riad al-Solh square.

The group, comprised of activists and family members of the missing persons, was sponsored by Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile and The Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon and was held on the 37th anniversary of the outbreak of the war, which claimed the lives of at least 150,000 people. Many also went missing after being arrested or captured by militias, which dominated the landscape up until the end of the years-long war.

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Despite the passing of almost four decades, families of the missing still hold out hope for news about the fate of their loved ones.

The mother of Fadi Haddad believes her son has been in a Syrian prison for 26 years. She said her son was kidnapped at the Barbara checkpoint in 1983, and was later handed him over to Syrian authorities.

Nineteen years after Haddad's disappearance, his mother is still trying to figure out his whereabouts.

"These missing people are not spies so it's not shameful for us to ask for their return," she said, urging Syrian President Bashar Assad to release all prisoners in his country.

The mother, on the verge of tears, said: "I think my son has amnesia. He doesn't know who he is."

Human rights groups have said they have evidence of more than 643 Lebanese missing in Syria.

According to Halwani, the government's message so far has been to move on. "We want tangible proof of what [the government is] telling us," said Halwani.

One man who believes his son might have been buried in a mass grave is Kamal Maarouf.

Passersby were asked to sign a petition demanding a new draft law be passed that assists people in discovering the fate of their missing relatives.

For their part, politicians issued various calls to learn from the past, and bolster national unity. "The Civil War should be remembered by learning lessons that conflicts and disputes take place when the game of [regional] alliances and political interests go beyond national interests," President Michel Sleiman said in a statement.

Sleiman hoped that Lebanese people will realize the need to commit to national principles.

"I hope the Lebanese will also realize that any dispute over any issue should be [resolved] within the democratic and constitutional framework," he added.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati, for his part, issued a call for national unity.

"The painful memory of the 37th anniversary of the outbreak of the Lebanese [Civil] War requires us to call on all Lebanese from different [political] affiliations to unite on a slogan to save our homeland and keep the horrors of war away," Mikati said.

"Serious dialogue to discuss ways to ward off the dangers on Lebanon – particularly in light of the tragic events the region is witnessing and protecting it from regional and international repercussions," Mikati said.

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Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri said the Civil War anniversary “should be an incentive to unmask a policy which threatens national peace and the will of coexistence.”

Hariri expressed solidarity with the families of martyrs as well as the families of kidnapped and missing persons and the thousands of families displaced by the successive wars in Lebanon.

“We look forward with all the loyalists to a sovereign Lebanon while resorting to the voice of wisdom and reason and that we learn from the bitter experiences our country has undergone and that we meet on the values that protect our freedom, our sovereignty and our democratic system, and liberate the state and its institutions from internal and external strength,” he said.