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Report closes the book on war's missing

Ranwa Yehia
Daily Star staff

After years of torturous uncertainty, the families of people missing or kidnapped during the war will now have to face a different reality – that the government considers their missing loved ones to be dead.

In a highly emotional statement addressed to the families on Tuesday, Prime Minister Salim Hoss announced his adoption of a recommendation issued by an investigative commission set up by the premier in January.

The report, which Hoss received on Monday, considered those kidnapped or missing for more than four years to be dead and recommended that the families resort to the judiciary to legally confirm the deaths.

In a telephone interview with The Daily Star, Hoss confirmed that the government had finally taken the step of officially declaring its opinion that the missing and kidnapped during the war are dead.

"The families must now resort to the judiciary to obtain death certificates," he said.

In his earlier statement, the premier extended his deepest sympathy and support for the families in "this difficult time."

"I hope that we all accept the truth that the commission arrived at and I hope that God blesses us all with patience," he said.

Hoss explained that he understood perfectly the painful repercussions the report would have on the families. "Still, I find no way but to admit the truth and accept it, no matter how difficult this may be," he said.

Speaking on behalf of the families, Wadad Halwani initially said they would not immediately comment and that a delegation representing the families intended to visit Hoss before

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announcing their position.

"We're holding a news conference on Friday anyway and we'll announce our position then," she said.

While past interviews conducted by this reporter with several bereaved family members showed that many of them wanted the government to take responsibility for discovering the fate of their missing relatives, many were still hesitant about accepting the fact that their loved ones were dead.

One thing is certain, however. This week will be one of the most difficult for the families.

The report, prepared by a commission comprising five high-ranking intelligence officers, was made following six months of investigation.

When Hoss set up the commission in January, the families were asked to fill in question-

naires detailing the circumstances in which their loved ones disappeared.

The report, which was also released on Tuesday, revealed that 2,046 questionnaires had been presented to offices related to the commission.

"In its investigations, the commission depended on information presented in each questionnaire. Representatives of security authorities at the commission delved for information about the missing in a quiet and secretive manner," the report said.

In addition to the administrative research, commission members went on a field investigation throughout the country, culminating in an inspection of mass graves for unidentified victims of the war. Bone samples were exhumed from the graves.

The report concluded that, based on the families' information, 216 people were thought to be in prisons inside Israel.

"After contacting Henry Fournier, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, he revealed that the Israeli authorities admitted to only 17 names," the report said.

As for the 168 thought to be in Syrian prisons, the report quoted Syrian security officials as saying that these people were not on Syrian territory.

The report concluded that not one of the kidnapped or missing had been proven to be alive on Lebanese territory, and that the mass killings by different militias during the civil war led to unidentified people being

buried in mass graves in Horsh Beirut, Mar Mitre graveyard and Achrafieh, while some were thrown into the sea.

The report said it had been impossible for coroners to make any identifications when they examined bone samples taken from the mass graves.

As a result, the commission recommended that those who had been missing for at least four years be considered dead.

"Personal-status codes in all sects in the country consider to be dead any person who disappeared in severe circumstances and whose body was not found after at least four years," the report said.

In a statement issued late on Tuesday, the families expressed their surprise that the report had been distributed to the press before the families were informed about it.

The statement protested about the lack of details on how the investigations were carried out. However, the families acknowledged that Hoss' statement was a first step toward the government assuming responsibility over the issue.

Earlier in the day, the families staged a second day of sit-ins in front of Baabda Palace, Parliament and the Grand Serail.

Halwani and others had the opportunity to talk to several MPs attending Parliament's legislative session. Halwani once again urged MPs to put their words of support into action and help the families to finally learn the truth.

Obituaries

Father of Sally, wife of Afif Daouk, and Lexi Craig announce with deep regret the passing away, in London, of

**RICHARD J.W. CRAIG
ESQ. OBE, MC**

Funeral services will take place at Richmond - Surry.
For more information:
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