

Keeping the disappeared in public sight

As relatives race to find answers, one artist tries to prevent the faces of the missing from fading

By Meris Lutz
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A faded photograph of a missing father, mother, son or daughter. Bones wrapped in nylon. Official denials. The story of more than 17,000 people who disappeared in Lebanon, mostly during the Civil War, remains unfinished, shrouded in mystery.

Despite one law, three official commissions and the alleged discovery of multiple mass graves, their memory is in danger of fading before meaningful legislation can be passed to help discover their fate.

In 2008, a young artist recognized some of their faces, featured on a poster for a photo exhibit, and was haunted by the thought that they would eventually be ripped down or plastered over. Five years later, he has excavated them from beneath layers of fliers, announcements and teaser campaigns, adding the names and dates of disappearances where he could, and even filling in the faces from memory.

"I knew many of these faces and I was especially angry about what will become of them, that they will be deformed," he says, recalling the first time he saw the posters back in 2008. "I knew that one day I would be restoring the faces."

"We will find them – it's impossible for someone to disappear. They're always somewhere."

The artist behind the project declined to be identified at the risk of distracting attention from what he considers the more important issue of what is being done to find the missing. The altered posters can be seen in the Beirut neighborhoods of Qantari and Gemmayzeh.

The Committee for the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon was formed in 1982 to offer mutual support and pressure the government to investigate the fates of cit-



The faces of the disappeared peek from behind more recently printed posters.

izens who disappeared. The government has launched several initiatives to this effect, but some of the families claim these overtures are intended to appease the families rather than actually investigate the cases.

In 1995, the government passed a law enabling families to declare dead anyone missing for more than four years, allowing inheritance and property rights to be settled. In 2000, it established a committee that issued a short report stating that all missing were presumed dead.

A year later, it formed a new commission to investigate the cases of Lebanese held in Syrian jails, and in

2005, the government backed a joint Syrian-Lebanese commission to look into prisoners in both countries.

The artist's wariness in revealing his identity mirrors the conflicting emotions of many relatives of the missing who find themselves caught between a desire to raise awareness and a fear that drawing attention could lead to the destruction of evidence or promising leads.

"If we mention something, we might lose it," the artist says.

In 2011 a laborer working on monastic land in the village of Shabanieh in the district of Baabda stumbled upon bones wrapped in nylon bags and informed the

local priest that he believed them to be human remains. The authorities descended on the site, which was sealed, and soon after released a statement insisting the bones were an animal's.

"Of course we were very suspicious," says Nizar Saghih, a lawyer and activist who represents the families of the disappeared.

Saghih says he and a forensic doctor went to the village to see for themselves, but were turned away by both the authorities and the church.

He took the case to court and won the right to appoint a forensic expert. He is currently fighting to have the site protected and eventually opened for

investigation, along with several other alleged mass grave sites in the country. Saghih said he expects a decision within several months.

The judiciary is proving one of the few arenas where progress can be made, especially following the Cabinet's refusal to pass or even seriously debate the draft law for the disappeared written by Saghih with the support of more than 15 local and international organizations including the Center for Transitional Justice.

Instead, Justice Minister Shakib Qortbawi sponsored an alternative: a decree that would form another commission tasked with following up on the cases of the forcibly disappeared. The proposal was rejected by the families as toothless and the project was shelved until Friday, when the justice minister announced he would propose it once more in the Cabinet.

"[Qortbawi] prefers a decree that passes over a law that never passes; that's his logic," says Saghih, adding that the government, and a large segment of society, would rather forget the war and sweep the issue of the disappeared under the rug.

"You have people who were involved in disappearances who are involved in government so of course they are reluctant to accept such claims. People say that by wanting to dig up the mass graves that means you want a new war ... There has been an attempt to delegitimize the cause."

Another major concern is that with the passage of time, the aging parents of the disappeared are passing away without ever finding answers, while the pool of DNA for identifying remains diminishes.

As for the artist, he is sure the truth of what happened to those who went missing will come out one day.

"We are aware of the reality of our country and our city, the reality of the presence of the disappeared somewhere in mass graves," he says.

"We go and dance in night clubs above them, we park our cars, we go jogging – we live above them and we know it, and I think we will be condemned by future generations for what we are doing."

Photo courtesy of the artist