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Middle East/North Africa: Day of the "disappeared" - Time to tell the whole truth

Hundreds of thousands of people have disappeared over the past decades in the Middle East and North Africa, the majority of them in Iraq, Amnesty International said today, on the Day of the Disappeared 2001.

"While recognising that authorities in some countries have established in recent years mechanisms to look into the fate of those who have 'disappeared,' the fate of many thousands of 'disappeared' remains however unknown," Amnesty International said. "There will be no justice for the victims and their families until thorough, independent and impartial investigations are conducted into each individual case of 'disappearance' in the region."

On 1 October 1980 seven brothers of the al-Hashemi family were arrested at different locations in Baghdad, Iraq. They were believed to have been arrested as "hostages" in lieu of another brother who had fled Iraq. Isma'il, the eldest of al-Hashemi brothers was executed in 1983. The fate of the remaining six brothers remains unknown.

Imam Musa Sadr, a prominent Iran-born Shi'a cleric in Lebanon, was last seen on 31 August 1978 in Tripoli, Libya. He was in the company of Sheikh Muhammad Ya'aqoub and 'Abbas Badreddine, a journalist, who have both since "disappeared." Fifty-year-old Imam Musa Sadr was reportedly due to meet Colonel Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi on the day he "disappeared." Libyan authorities claimed that Musa Sadr left for Italy on that day but this is in conflict with investigations by the Italian authorities which were confirmed by the judgement of an Italian court.

M'hamed Mohammedi, a 63-year-old tradesman, was taken from his home in a village in the province of Relizane, Algeria, on 5 October 1996 at 9.30pm by members of the local *garde communale* (communal guard). Neighbours and passers-by who witnessed the operation saw M'hamed being taken away in a car belonging to the local *garde communale*. His family learned that after being held for one night in Relizane, he was transferred to a military barracks in Kaila, but has heard nothing more ever since.

In **Algeria** thousands of men and women have "disappeared" over the past decade after being taken away by the security forces. The victims are a widely varied group of people. They come from all social, economic and political backgrounds and from most areas of the country. People of all ages have been affected.

The victims "disappeared" after being taken away from their home, their workplace or elsewhere, often in front of relatives, neighbours or colleagues, by members of the police, gendarmerie and military security units, as well as by state-armed militias. Some of the "disappeared" are thought to have been arrested because they were suspected of being involved in some way with an armed group. Others were merely denounced as such. For others still, there is no discernible reason for the "disappearance."

Relatives, especially mothers and wives, of the "disappeared" have been bearing the brunt of the tragedy, facing bureaucratic complications in addition to anguish, despair and economic hardship. Families have spared no efforts to try to obtain the smallest scrap of news concerning the whereabouts of their missing relatives. Their inquiries with the authorities have in most cases borne no fruit, and in the few cases when a reply has been forthcoming, families are usually told that the "disappeared" is either not known to the authorities, has run off to join an armed group or has been abducted and perhaps killed by an armed

group. But such explanations often contradict eye-witness accounts of the arrest of a "disappeared" person and subsequent reports received from people who had encountered them in secret detention and were later released.

Until last year, the issue of "disappearances" was a taboo subject in Algeria and received little attention on the international level. For years families of the "disappeared" refrained from protesting publicly out of fear for the safety of their detained relatives and themselves. However, during the course of 1998 more and more families overcame their fear. As a result, their increasingly persistent protests and lobbying forced the issue to be debated in parliament, on the streets and on the front pages of the national press.

In **Iraq** the fate of hundreds of thousands of people who "disappeared" since the early 1980s remains unresolved. For example, with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 entire Shi'a Muslim Arab families and Feily Kurds who were declared by the Iraqi authorities to be of "Iranian descent" were deported to Iran. Thousands of male members of such families were arrested and "disappeared." In 1983 some 8,000 men and boys, aged between 8 and 70, from the Barzani clan near the northern city of Arbil, were arrested by Iraqi forces and transferred to unknown places. All have "disappeared."

In 1988 and in a space of three to four months, more than 100,000 Kurdish civilians are believed to have "disappeared" in the so-called Operation Anfal when the Iraqi Government implemented a program of destruction of villages and towns all over Iraqi Kurdistan. At the end of the Gulf War and following the March 1991 uprising against the government by Shi'a Muslims in the south and Kurds in the north, 106 Shi'a Muslim clerics and students were arrested in the southern city of al-Najaf. Their fate and whereabouts remain unknown to this date.

During the same period, when Iraqi forces pulled out of Kuwait, more than 600 Kuwaiti and other nationals were arrested and taken to Iraq. Despite international pressure, nothing has been heard of them. The practice of "disappearances" by the Iraqi authorities continued in the 1990s with the arrest and "disappearance"of hundreds of suspected members of opposition groups, such as in the aftermath of the assassination of the Ayatollah Sadeq al-Sadr in February 1999.

In **Lebanon** thousands of people "disappeared" during the civil war from 1975 to 1990. All militias operating in Lebanon abducted suspected supporters of other groups; many victims were subsequently killed and some were transferred to detention centres controlled by the militias. Many other Lebanese nationals were captured by Syrian and Israeli forces operating in Lebanon. Others were transferred by militias to Syrian or Israeli allies. The majority of victims remain unaccounted for.

After years of protest within Lebanon, led by the Committee of the Relatives of the Kidnapped and Missing, and two initial investigations, the Lebanese Government finally set up a Commission of Inquiry into the "disappearances" in January 2000. The Commission questioned families of victims and members of former militias, and visited sites of mass graves. Lists of "disappeared" said to have been taken by Syria and Israel were sent to the Syrian Government and, via the ICRC, to the Israeli Government. Both governments denied knowledge of the whereabouts of those on the list.

However, the families protested against the Commission's conclusion that none of the "disappeared" was alive in Lebanon and that those alive in Lebanon and those missing for at least four years should be considered dead. A new Commission of Inquiry, set up in 2001, is probing more deeply into the fate of the "disappeared." A few who were thought to have "disappeared" have been found alive in Syrian

prisons, while in Israel at least one mass grave, said to date from 1982, has not yet been fully investigated.

In **Morocco** hundreds of Moroccans and Sahrawis "disappeared" at the hands of the Moroccan security services between the early 1960s and the late 1980s. In June 1991 some 300 Sahrawis were released from the secret detention centres of Qalat M'Gouna and Laayoune after up to 16 years' "disappearance." At the end of 1991 some 30 Moroccans were released from the secret detention centre of Tazmamart after 18 years' disappearance. Some 50 Sahrawis and some 30 Moroccan "disappeared" died in secret detention between 1976 and 1991 in the secret detention centres of Agdz, Qal'at M'Gouna, Laayoune and Tazmamart. Hundreds of others are still unaccounted for.

An arbitration commission, established by King Muhammed VI in July 2000 to decide on compensation for material and psychological damage suffered by victims of "disappearance" and their families, has so far awarded compensation in scores of cases. However, hundreds of former "disappeared" and families of victims continue to call on the authorities to ensure that full investigations are carried out.

The fate of hundreds of people who had "disappeared" in **Yemen** since the late 1960s remains unknown. People have "disappeared" following arrest by security forces or militia, particularly during or in the wake of political power struggles. Large-scale "disappearances" occurred both during the civil war which broke out in May 1994, and in January 1986 when a 10-day civil war broke out between different factions of the Yemeni Socialist Party. Undertakings made by the government to investigate the cases of those who had "disappeared" since 1994 were apparently not implemented.

In November 1990 the Yemeni government stated that those who "disappeared" before 1978 were executed after summary trials. With regard to those who "disappeared" before 1986, it stated that some individuals were released, but that it had no information about other individuals named by Amnesty International. The government said it would look into any cases submitted by the organization. In 1992 and 1996 Amnesty International submitted for investigation a total of 269 cases to the government including prisoners who had "disappeared" in Yemen since 1970. The then Attorney General undertook to investigate cases of those reported to have "disappeared" since 1994 and found 27 cases of "disappearances."

On this day Amnesty International adds its voice to the families of "disappeared" and calls on all governments to conduct full investigations, in accordance with international standards, into all cases of "disappearances," to bring those responsible to justice and to ensure adequate compensation for survivors of "disappearance" and for the relatives of those who remain "disappeared."

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