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Lebanon urged to investigate civil war missing

The Lebanese authorities must take urgent steps to establish an independent commission to fully investigate the fates of thousands of people missing since Lebanon's civil war, Amnesty International said today.

Never Forgotten: Lebanon's Missing People documents a bitter legacy of the 1975-1990 civil war: the thousands of people whose fates remain unknown.

Some went missing after they were arrested or captured by parties to the conflict, others may have been killed during battles and massacres, while others vanished in unclear circumstances.

"It really is high time that the Lebanese authorities took steps towards bringing this very painful episode to a close," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director.

"Both the President and the Council of Ministers pledged action but as yet no concrete steps have been taken to address the continued suffering of the families who have been waiting for so long to find out what happened to their loved ones."

"What is urgently needed now is an independent commission of inquiry, one that includes among its members representatives of the families of the missing."

Amnesty International is also calling on the authorities to set up a programme to collect DNA from the families of the missing who wish it, and to ensure that DNA testing is done whenever human remains of those killed in the conflict are uncovered.

"Science provides a means today of finding the identities of people who went missing in the civil war in a way that was just not possible then, as the experience of other countries has shown," said Malcolm Smart.

Previous investigations established by the authorities have not been independent, transparent or effective, leaving families of the missing to suffer the anguish of loss and continuing uncertainty.

Many families wish to know where their loved ones are buried so that they can organize a dignified burial and properly grieve.

Others still hold out hope that their relatives may still be alive in Syria or elsewhere as some of those detained by armed groups or government forces were transferred out of the country, making it doubly difficult for families to obtain answers.

Amineh 'Abd al-Husri, 78, continues to campaign vigorously for the truth about what happened to her missing son Ahmed. She knows that her son disappeared from Beirut in 1986 and believes that he was handed over to the Syrian authorities, but there the trail goes cold.

“I want my son back. We all want our sons back – even if it is in a coffin. Maybe he is dead, I don't know. But if I have his body, I would like to bury him next to his father,” she told Amnesty International.

The disappearance without trace, in many cases of the family's breadwinner, has left families destitute, and in many cases powerless to obtain passports because women are unable to get them without an official male guardian.

“The rights of victims and their families to truth, justice and where applicable reparations, can only be achieved with the full co-operation and transparency of state institutions and individuals involved, without exemption.”

Note for editors

Under international human right standards families have the right to know the fate of their relatives in relation to situations of armed conflict. Parties to armed conflict must release all relevant information about the fate or whereabouts of people reported missing, and states must conduct thorough and independent investigations into violations of human rights during, and after, a conflict.

Amnesty International spoke to many relatives of the missing during a research visit to Lebanon in October 2010. The organization delayed the document's launch due to recent events in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region.

The civil war in Lebanon, which started 36 years ago this week and ran from 1975 to 1990, was a series of interconnected conflicts involving many different parties, including the Lebanese, Palestinians, Israelis and Syrians. It had nationalistic, ideological and sectarian dimensions, some of which initially coalesced around opposition to, or support of, the Palestinian refugee population. To some extent it also pitted Lebanon's different faith communities against one another.

The civil war involved direct armed intervention by Israel and Syria, often in alliance with different Lebanese factions, and witnessed invasions and occupation by the Israeli armed forces, who finally withdrew in 2000, and a long Syrian military presence which continued until 2005.