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Lebanon: Truth is a necessary part of reconciliation

"The work done by the Commission of Inquiry into the fate of those missing and kidnapped during the civil war in Lebanon is the beginning, not the end, of a process to help those who had suffered decades of grief and tragedy," Amnesty International said. "This is a debt owed both to the living and the dead."

In its comment on the report of the Commission, the human rights organization said that the government should implement the recommendations from families of the missing and from non-governmental organizations concerned with the issue without further delay.

The Commission of Inquiry was set up by the Lebanese Government in January 2000 as a result of pressure from the families of those who "disappeared" during the 15-year civil war from 1975 to 1990. A Committee for the Relatives of the Kidnapped and Missing has been holding vigils near the weekly cabinet meetings, outside the Beirut Museum, at a notorious checkpoint between east and west Beirut where many were seized by militias and "disappeared".

The Commission issued forms for families of the missing to fill in and then, according to their report, they followed up each individual case, questioning, in confidence, former victims, eyewitnesses and members of militias involved in kidnappings and extra-judicial executions. The Commission examined several mass graves but stated that they had not been able to ascertain the identities of those who were buried. The report states that none of the "disappeared" was alive in Lebanon, and

one of the conclusions of the reports recommends that those missing for at least four years should be considered dead.

A list of 216 persons whose families believed they had been taken by Israeli forces or transferred to Israel was sent to the Israeli Government through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). A list of 168 persons whose families believed they had been taken by Syrian forces or transferred to Syria was sent to the Syrian Government. Both governments denied knowledge of the whereabouts of those on the list.

Notwithstanding its flaws -- such as the short timeframe, the failure to include independent non-government members in the Commission and the failure to discuss the "disappearances" of those whose family failed to fill in the forms -- the Commission's report is a positive step.

Amnesty International called on the Lebanese Government to accept the demand of the families of the "disappeared" -- supported by the Commission of Inquiry -- for compensation and social rehabilitation. The Israeli Government and the Syrian Government should compensate families of those who "disappeared" while in their charge.

"Many Lebanese remain in unacknowledged detention in Syria; others are still held in Israel," Amnesty International said. "If this report is to be a beginning and not an end to justice, the Syrian and Israeli governments should release all those held in relation to the conflict and open their records in order to further elucidate the fate of those who 'disappeared' while in their custody".

Amnesty International welcomed the fact that the families of all those missing and kidnapped would be given the details of what had been

found out relevant to their case. However, since many relatives live far from Beirut, and those who filled in forms include relatives living overseas, the organization called on the Commission to ensure that each person who contacted them should be informed of the established facts. The organization also called on the Lebanese Government to order that the whole report be made public.

"The Commission of Inquiry's report, followed by the speech of Prime Minister Salim al-Huss and the reception of representatives of the families by the President, is a recognition that the tragedies of the past must not be swept under the carpet," the organization said. "Truth is not an enemy, but a necessary part of reconciliation."

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