

Opposition MPs urge government to act on Lebanese detained in Syrian prisons

BEIRUT: Opposition politicians have urged the government to press Syria's regime on the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons after the release of Yaacoub Shamoun, who was freed after spending 27 years in custody.

In a statement released after their weekly meeting, the Future bloc said Tuesday, "We urge the government to move forward on the issue of Lebanese detainees and forcibly disappeared in Syrian prisons."

Lebanese Shamoun was freed three months ago, The Daily Star learned Tuesday, and his release has given hope to the relatives of hundreds of others who were kidnapped during the 1975-90 Civil War.

The Future statement also asked the government to "prepare the necessary documents to press charges against those who arrested them and curtailed their freedom in a clear violation of the law and what is considered a crime against humanity, especially with the release of Shamoun after 27 years."

Also Tuesday, Metn MP Sami Gemayel met with Minister of the Displaced Alaeddine Terro at Gemayel's office in Bikfaya, where they discussed displaced and detained Lebanese.

After the meeting Terro said, "There is a ministerial committee tasked with following up on the issue of detainees in Syrian prisons and we hope that this issue moves forward today in light of the difficult security circumstances and for the safety of those detainees.

"We hope that the Lebanese government, and other countries, pressure Syria to release these detainees," the minister added.

Speaking of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons Gemayel said, "Despite all the denials from Syria that we have heard over the last 30 years, it is clear this issue is as real as we claim.

"There's a list that was presented previously including the names of more than 300 Lebanese detained in Syrian prisons, including Kataeb members, members of the Lebanese Army, monks and others," he added.

"The Lebanese government should have the dignity to demand their release and defend their rights.

"Today, more than ever, we need everyone to act, whether at the level of the government, or March 14, or the Syrian opposition, or the international community. Or any group that can help discover the fate of these Lebanese and return them safely to Lebanon, we call on their help,"

Gemayel said.

Shamoun was kidnapped in July 1985 due to his membership in the Kataeb party, Ghazi Aad, president of the nongovernmental organization Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE) told The Daily Star.

"He was released three months ago but he was afraid to talk to anyone," Aad said. "Afraid someone would target him ... maybe people in support of the regime in Syria."

Upon his abduction, he was sentenced to life with hard labor.

Shamoun was originally held in Saydneya, north of Damascus, along with five other Lebanese. They were then dispersed to other prisons across Syria. He was released this year from a prison in the eastern region of Hasaka.

Aad said Shamoun's file was eventually transferred to the civil court, making it easier for his family to hire a lawyer and finalize his case.

"This gives us hope that there are Lebanese in Syrian prisons who are still alive," the activist said.

An estimated 600 Lebanese were kidnapped during the Lebanese Civil War and held in Syrian prisons, but Aad said that Shamoun and the five others were not listed as missing in their files.

"There might be even more than we believe," Aad said.

Elsewhere Tuesday, ahead of the International Day of the Disappeared Thursday, the International Committee of the Red Cross called on the families of people who have gone missing in Lebanon to get in touch with its delegation in order to provide information on their loved ones.

Around 17,000 people went missing or were abducted during the 1975-1990 Civil War alone.

This latest step by the ICRC is part of a project launched by the global NGO in April to collect pre-disappearance data.

"I take this opportunity to call on all families who have a relative who went missing during conflict or violence in Lebanon to contact the ICRC so that they can be included in the collection of data," said Jurg Montani, head of the ICRC delegation in Lebanon.

"The aim now is to make sure the information on the missing persons is not lost and that it is properly safeguarded," he added. "This will ultimately serve to address the families' primary need: the need to know."

Many activists have criticized the government for inaction with regard to Lebanese prisoners in Syria.

During a sit-in held by SOLIDE and relatives of prisoners last year, Justice Minister Shakib Qortbawi promised protesters he would write a decree to establish the long-awaited national commission for the victims of enforced disappearance.

The families of missing persons can register for an interview to give information on their loved ones by contacting ICRC's delegation in Beirut on 03-186-386.

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