

Renewed efforts to free Lebanese jailed in Syria following detainee's release

By Jana El Hassan

BEIRUT: Justice Minister Shakib Qortbawi said Wednesday that his ministry is finalizing the draft decree establishing the Independent National Commission (INC) mandated with investigating the fate of Lebanese missing persons.

"Hopefully, the draft will be ready within the next few days [and I will] sign it and refer it to the Cabinet," Qortbawi told The Daily Star.

Qortbawi said that the INC's members are taking into consideration the observations of the State Shura Council, but stressed that it will be an independent and non-governmental body. He added that its members will include judges as well as representatives of the Red Cross and the families of the missing.

"They will be tasked with gathering information about the missing Lebanese," said Qortbawi.

Commenting on the release of Lebanese citizen Yaacoub Shamoun, who was released three months ago after having been imprisoned in Syria for 27 years, the minister said that the Lebanese Judicial Committee is following up on his case.

Shamoun's release three months ago has only recently been made public, with Shamoun having initially refused to make his situation known for fear of being subjected to violence at the hands of pro-Syrian elements.

Qortbawi said that the Committee would want to hear from Shamoun whether he had come into contact with other Lebanese detainees in the Syrian prisons in which he was incarcerated.

"We will meet with Shamoun Thursday at 10:30 am at the Committee's office in Beirut to hear about his imprisonment in Syria," Judge George Rizk, one of the Committee's two members, told The Daily Star.

Rizk also indicated that the Committee is seeking to determine whether any other Lebanese prisoners are detained in Syria.

According to Rizk, the Committee had been working on the case with its counterpart, the Syrian Judicial Committee, until the Syrian security situation deteriorated.

"We had a few names of missing [Lebanese] possibly detained in Syria, but the Syrian side continued to deny that it had any information on them," said Rizk.

Ghazi Aad, founder and director of SOLIDE (Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile),

voiced optimism over Qortbawi's efforts, saying that establishing the INC is a very positive step toward revealing the fate of the missing Lebanese.

"We have been calling for establishing such a body for a long time, and we hope it will finally see the light of day," Aad told The Daily Star.

He added that Shamoun's release proves that reports denying the presence of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons are wrong.

"I met with Shamoun and talked to him. He mentioned five detainees we didn't have in our six-hundred missing persons list, which means there might be even more Lebanese in Syrian jails," Aad said.

Shamoun also met with Metn MP and Kataeb party member Sami Gemayel in Bikfaya, Mount Lebanon, Wednesday afternoon, according to the National News Agency. Gemayel praised Shamoun and presented him with an award for his many sacrifices.

For his part, Shamoun said, "I am happy to return to my house and to the house of the Kataeb," and thanked those in attendance for the appreciation and affection they showed him.

Shamoun release has given hope to the relatives of hundreds of other Lebanese who were kidnapped during the 1975-90 Civil War.

The Syrian regime has long denied holding Lebanese prisoners of conscience, only to release a trickle every so often.

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