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Lebanon: Identification of journalist's remains must spur action on other civil war victims

The confirmation yesterday that remains recovered last week are those of a British journalist kidnapped during Lebanon's 15-year civil war once again draws attention to the need for concerted action to reveal the fate of thousands of Lebanese, Palestinians and others who were abducted between 1975 and 1990.

The body of freelance journalist Alec Collett, who was 64 when he was seized from a car in Beirut in 1985 after being commissioned by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to write about Palestinian refugee camps, was discovered and exhumed last week by a team of British experts working in co-operation with the Lebanese authorities in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon.

The remains were reportedly found in the town of Aita al-Foukhar at a site that was formerly used as a base by Fatah - the Revolutionary Council, a Palestinian militia more commonly known as the Abu Nidal Organization that had claimed responsibility for his kidnapping in 1985 and killing in 1986.

The identification of the remains as those of Alec Collett was confirmed by the results of a DNA test. The British team reportedly also found at the same site the body of a younger individual, but its identity was apparently not established and it was subsequently reburied.

The discovery of Alec Collett's remains is a welcome development, not least for his family, who have been waiting nearly 25 years for his fate to be clarified. However, it draws into sharp relief the inadequacy of efforts by the Lebanese authorities to reveal the fate and whereabouts of the thousands of Lebanese, Palestinian and other nationals who were abducted by various armed militias or subjected to enforced disappearance by Lebanese, Syrian and Israeli forces during the civil war.

The apparent inability of the Lebanese authorities to identify the second body highlights, in particular, their failure to establish a database containing DNA samples from family members of those who went missing during the war. Lebanese associations of families of civil war victims have been campaigning for the creation of such a database for more than a decade.

The discovery of two bodies at the former militia base also raises the possibility that other missing persons could be buried there. The Lebanese authorities must immediately protect the site and take action to check for other human remains; if further bodies are found, the authorities should take steps to identify them and hand them over to their families.

More widely, some 20 years after the end of the civil war, the Lebanese state has generally failed to conduct exhumations at mass graves from the period, even where their presence has been officially acknowledged. Among the mass graves are three located in Beirut and mentioned in a three-page summary of the findings of the Official Commission of Investigation into the Fate of the Abducted and Disappeared Persons in 2000: the St Demetrious Cemetery in Achrafieh, the Martyrs' Cemetery in Horsh Beirut and the English Cemetery in Tahwita.

A preliminary ruling by Lebanese judicial authorities last month that the government should provide the full findings of the 2000 investigations could, however, lead to exhumations at these sites in the future. The decision came in response to a lawsuit filed by two Lebanese non-governmental organizations, the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon (CFKDL) and Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE).

The only mass grave where the Lebanese authorities have completed exhumations and DNA tests, as far as Amnesty International is aware, was one located next to the Ministry of Defence in al-Yarze, where the remains of 24 military personnel were discovered in November 2005, seven months following the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. President Michel Suleiman, who was then army commander, formed a committee to conduct DNA tests on the remains.

Two weeks ago, on 11 November, the body of Johnny Nassif, a Lebanese soldier who went missing on 13 October 1990 during clashes with Syrian troops, was the latest to be identified by these tests. He was among 10 soldiers reportedly killed by Syrian forces during and after the clashes and believed to have been buried at the site; the remaining 14 bodies belonged to Lebanese soldiers killed in the early to mid 1980s.

Johnny Nassif's family had initially turned down the offer of a DNA test because they believed he was detained in Syria and distrusted the Lebanese authorities, which were for years dominated by Syria. The family of one other soldier believed to be among the same group of 10 remains unwilling for a DNA test to be conducted on his suspected remains.

The whereabouts of another 20 soldiers and two priests, Albert Sherfan and Suleiman Abu Khalil, who went missing on the same day as Johnny Nassif remain unknown; their families believe they are being held in Syria.

The Lebanese authorities must proceed without delay to investigating all mass grave sites in the country so that the ordeal of all families waiting for news about relatives missing since the civil war can finally learn the truth about their fate.

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