

NGOs launch advocacy, awareness project on Lebanese missing and disappeared

BEIRUT: A project to empower the families of the forcibly disappeared in Lebanon has been launched Thursday by the local Lebanese NGO Act for Disappeared, to help them in their struggle to know the destiny of their loved ones.

Funded by the EU, and in partnership with ABAAD - Resource Center for Gender Equality and Legal Agenda, ACT's program would teach families how to advocate for their 'right to know' and make their voices heard by decision makers.

The launch was announced in a press conference at Lebanon's Press Club office, where an official from the EU delegation to Lebanon, Alexis Loeber, talked about the reason behind EU's interest in the project.

"Behind each and every one of the thousands of victims stand their loved ones, a family, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, and friends alike," Loeber said. "They have not stopped seeking answers."

For years, civil society organizations as well as some families of the missing and forcibly disappeared, have been actively advocating for action to help clarify the fate of their loved ones.

"Remaining in uncertainty, it appears almost impossible for victims' families to leave the past behind and face the future," Loeber said.

The State Council (Shura Council) made a decision earlier this year to recognize the families' right to know, and NGOs submitted a draft law aimed at establishing a commission to uncover the fate of the disappeared.

However, according to ACT, public awareness of these developments and their implications was still low. As a result, the program also aims to facilitate the creation of a nation-wide network for families of the disappeared, which will provide them with a platform to express their views to the public.

ACT will organize information meetings for the families in five regions in Lebanon; Chouf, Mount Lebanon, Beirut, Tyre and Tripoli, following the first of such meetings in the Shatila camp.

After these meetings, will be group discussions with the mothers and wives where they will share experiences.

The NGO will also gather information that can help identify potential locations of mass graves, and develop hypotheses pertaining to the possible identity of victims.

In parallel, the project will also support the families' associations in an ongoing judicial process, which falls under the expertise of Legal Agenda. The objective is a judicial decision that recognizes the existence of mass graves and protects them before their future exhumation.

"After the historic ruling of Lebanon's State Council on March 4, 2014, it has become ever more important to locate the existence of mass graves in the country and to protect them through the judiciary," said Legal Agenda's representative.