Flurry of Syrian death notices shows fate of government detainees

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For six years Amina al-Khoulani hoped her brothers Majd and Abdelsattar were alive, albeit cut off in a Syrian government prison after their arrest early in Syria’s war.

But last week, newly published state records obtained by relatives told her the men died back in 2013, just weeks after the family last saw them through a metal fence during a visit to the Sednaya military jail near Damascus.

“We used to hear a lot of reports that they had been executed. We know that the regime is criminal and is capable of doing this but you always have hope that this is untrue,” al-Khoulani, a refugee in Britain, said in a video call.

After years of government silence about the fate of tens of thousands of people that rights groups say have been forcibly disappeared in the war, authorities have begun quietly updating registers to acknowledge hundreds of their deaths, according to Syrians who have recently learnt of their relatives’ fate.

Starting in around April, families began discovering what happened to their loved ones by chance, when they requested records from register offices, rights groups and Syrians said.

Such records are needed for many administrative tasks in Syria, so they are often sought. Only this time, the information was not what they expected - but what they had long feared.

Word spread that deaths were being acknowledged and more people began approaching registries for information.

Reuters in Beirut did not receive any response to questions faxed to the Syrian Information Ministry in Damascus. Officials at the Syrian missions in New York and Geneva could not be reached for comment.

The Syrian government last year denied a report by Amnesty International saying it had carried out a campaign of mass hangings and exterminations at Sedneya prison, calling it “devoid of truth”.

TIME OF DEATH: 10 P.M.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), which has been documenting the war from outside Syria, has recorded 532 cases of forcibly disappeared people being listed as deceased in state records in recent months, without relatives having been previously informed of their deaths.

SNHR head Fadel Abdul Ghany said the death notices were Assad’s signal to Syria that he has won.

Anwar al-Bunni, a human rights lawyer with the Berlin-based Syrian Centre for Legal Research and Studies and himself a former detainee now based outside Syria, put the figure much higher. From sources inside Syria, he had so far documented 3,000 names and called this the tip of the iceberg.

“Mothers and sisters are going to see if their sons are on the lists. Those that find out drop to the ground and faint,” said 63-year-old Fadwa Mahmoud, a refugee in Germany who founded Families for Freedom which campaigns on behalf of disappeared and detained Syrians.

Mahmoud is herself awaiting news of her husband and son who were detained in 2012.

Many of the death notices on the updated register are for activists arrested in the early days of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and 2012.

And many of those came from the Damascus suburb of Daraya, one of the early centers of the uprising where rebels were finally defeated by the government in 2016 after years of siege.

“Of course the paper does not state that they died in prison ... the death is written, the date, and that is it,” said al-Khoulani. The al-Khoulani brothers’ registry document, seen by Reuters, says they both died at 10 p.m. on Jan. 15, 2013.

She said her brothers had been taking part in Daraya protests calling for “freedom and dignity” - slogans of the “Arab Spring” uprisings under way across the region at the time.

Abdelsattar’s friend and fellow protester Islam al-Dabbas also died that day, al-Khoulani said. So too did prominent Daraya activist Yahya al-Shorbaji, his family - now living outside Syria - told Reuters, producing his record.

The number of Daraya residents registered as having died on the same day has led relatives to conclude they were executed together.

“I WANT JUSTICE”

A resident of Mouadamiya town, another early center of the uprising, said 96 people had recently been listed as dead at the local records office. But the resident’s son, missing since January 2013, was not among them.

“My heart and my hopes say he is alive, God willing, but common sense says that he has been killed with many others because he was a peaceful activist,” the resident said.

SNHR has documented at least 85,036 people forcibly disappeared across Syria since the start of the war.

Around 90 percent are thought to have been taken by government security agencies, the rest by factions operating in Syria’s chaotic multi-sided war, it said.

Backed by Russia and Iran, Assad’s advances have accelerated this year with rebels now posing no military threat to his rule.

Assad’s ally Russia is urging refugees to come home, saying there is nothing to fear from Assad’s government.

But people continue to flee areas that are falling back under its control, and many refugees say they are scared to return, fearing arrest, conscription or worse.

Syrian opposition officials and Turkey, which backs them, have pushed for the issue of detainees and the forcibly disappeared to be discussed in peace talks that have made no progress.

“They forced us out of our homes, took our money and killed our children,” said the mother of the al-Khoulani brothers from her exile in Britain. “I want justice.”