

Experts Urge State to Curb Child Abduction

PATRICK GALEY, The Daily Star (Lebanon), November 15, 2011

BEIRUT: The government was urged Monday to sign up to an international agreement that would help reduce the rate of child abduction in Lebanon. Experts from several countries gathered to discuss The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, of which Lebanon is not a signatory, and measures to combat what is a growing trend of missions relocated against their will.

“Our biggest problems come with non-signatories of The Hague convention,” said Allison Shalaby, the acting director of British anti-abduction charity Reunite. “The more awareness we can raise the more we can reduce the number of abductions.”

Shalaby, whose own daughter was abducted to Egypt, said that a large proportion of abductions were committed by parents who are unaware such action is illegal.

“A lot of parents don’t realize that they can actually abduct their own children,” she said.

Statistics collected by Reunite suggest that 70 percent of abductions are undertaken by mothers. Shalaby said that her organization had seen a 45 percent annual rise in reported cases.

British Ambassador Tom Fletcher, whose mission helped to organize the conference alongside the U.K.’s Foreign Office, said diplomats were increasingly finding themselves dealing with abduction cases.

“These are always complex, traumatic and sad,” he told The Daily Star. “There are never any winners. We wanted to explore how we can protect the children involved more effectively. This conference attempts to do that, for the first time bringing together embassy staff from across the world, with governments and relevant NGOs.”

He urged all countries to sign up to The Hague Convention, which protects children from abduction.

“We find that Lebanese authorities are usually keen to help resolve tricky cases. [The convention] gives us a better framework for dealing with cases of this sort.

“We should remember that these cases are not one-way – we are also trying to combat child abduction from the region to the West,” Fletcher said.

Personal status disputes in Lebanon are decided through religious courts and often favor the side of fathers.

The judiciary does not consider international parental kidnapping as a crime and it is permitted to prevent family members from leaving the country, even if they hold dual nationality.

A clutch of Western countries already alert foreigners to the risk of child abduction in Lebanon.

“Lebanese family law is very different from U.K. law and particular caution is needed if child custody is [or becomes] an issue,” Britain’s Lebanon travel advice states.

Australia’s Foreign Office warns dual nationality parents it is powerless to intervene in abduction cases committed in Lebanon.

“Australians [including mothers with children] have been prevented from leaving Lebanon when relatives have legally placed border alerts [known as ‘stop orders’] on them,” it says. “The Australian Government cannot prevent or overturn the issue of a ‘stop order’ on an Australian citizen.”

With a large expatriate population in Lebanon, Australia is no stranger to the idea of child abduction involving Lebanese victims.

Earlier this month, Melbourne’s Herald Sun reported that more than 100 Lebanese minors had been transferred to Australia on marriage visas, requiring them to marry their sponsors within nine months of arrival.

“In one case, Lebanese [teen] sought protection after she arrived on a prospective spouse visa for an arranged marriage to a man decades her senior,” the paper reported.

“She found he was a violent drunk who kept a previous wife and three children in an adjoining townhouse. She was granted a protection visa after her own family threatened to kill her.”

Lebanese lawyers Ibrahim Traboulsi, Laura Sfeir and Shawkat Howeilla offered advice to conference participants on the views various religious courts had on child abduction. Representatives of General Security were also present at the event, the first of its kind in the region.