

# Civil War bus to travel on 'memory stops' tour

The vehicle acts as a mobile archive of the conflict, holding details of key actors and events

By Olivia Alabaster  
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: On the anniversary of the start of the Civil War 37 years ago, the iconic image of the Ain al-Rummaneh bus is being reimagined as a way to confronting the country's past head-on.

The project, "The Bus Takes the Podium: Voyages into the Memory of Lebanon and its People," is being coordinated by UMAM Documentation and Research, and funded by the European Union in conjunction with the U.N. Development Program.

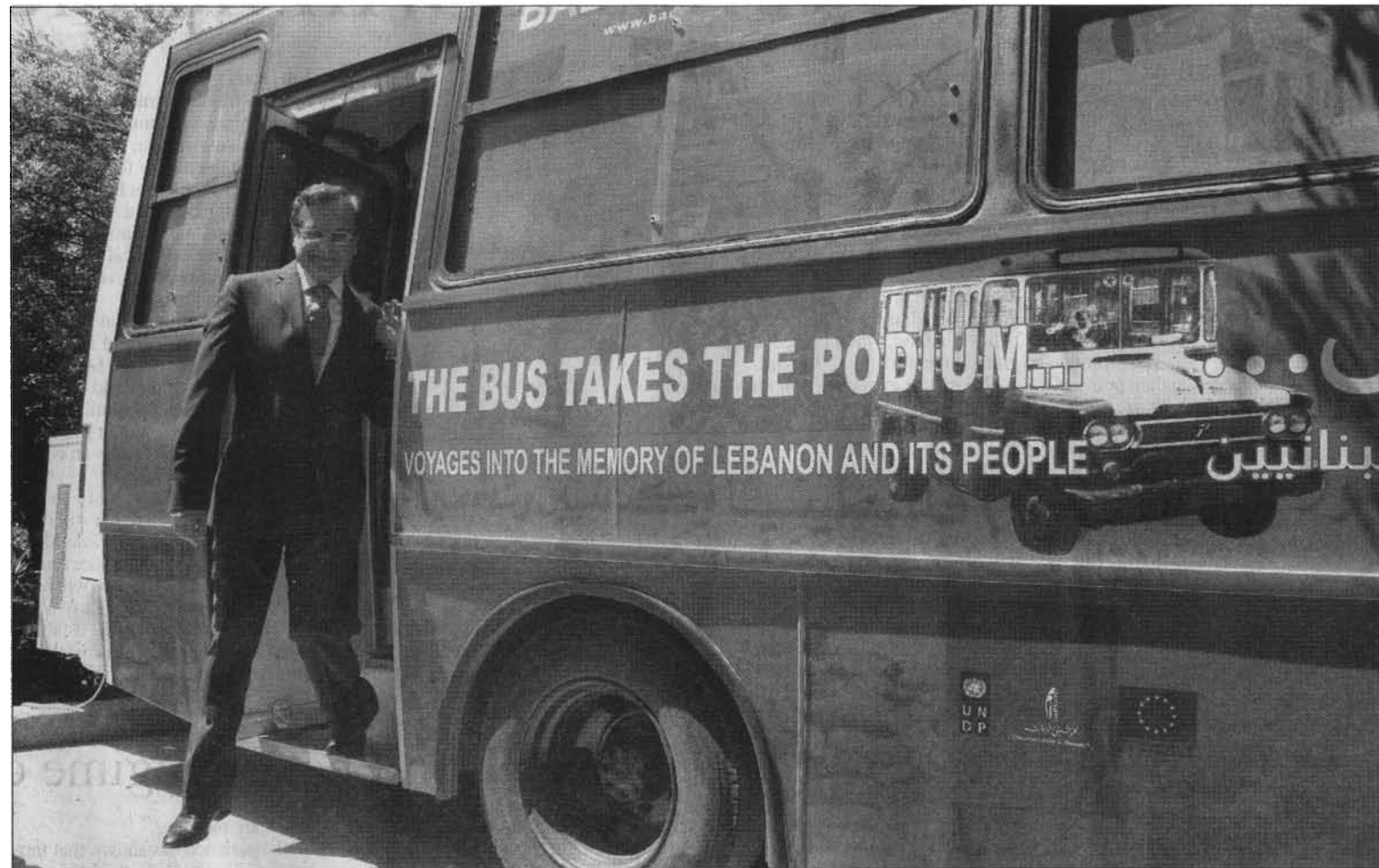
Widely accredited with being the final catalyst that sparked the outbreak of war, a massacre of Palestinians on board a bus in a Beirut suburb on April 13, 1975, has led many to hold the "bus" as a symbol for that era, which saw between 150,000 and 200,000 people lose their lives.

That original bus has been recovered by UMAM, and is on permanent display at their Hangar site in Haret Hreik.

But it is a more modern bus, previously of the Beirut-Sidon line, which has been transformed into a mobile archive of the Civil War, and which will travel around the country in an effort to allow the population to discuss and reflect on their experiences and memories of the time.

Speaking at the launch Thursday, at which Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour represented Prime Minister Najib Mikati, project manager Layal Assad explained the inspiration behind the idea. "The bus is a symbol in the minds of the Lebanese. It reminds us of a tragic event," she said. "Sometimes questions are emotional," she added, but it was important to "remember and not repeat the same mistakes."

"We want to turn the idea of the bus being cursed into the idea that it is



Mansour attended the launch of the bus, which the organizers hope to will serve as a symbol of the war's violence.

blessed," Assad added.

Lokman Slim, the director of UMAM, warned that since the end of the Civil War, the Lebanese have been living in an "incomplete peace," which has worsened over the last few years. "'Peace' seems like a word which is just being used to preserve stability," he said.

It is vital, he added, for people young and old to "come to terms with the war and the violence that was used."

The mobile unit, which contains UMAM's Civil War archives – com-

prised of diaries, information on key events and actors, on victims, missing persons, as well as media coverage from the time – will tour every region of the country, starting Friday in Beirut's Sodeco Square at 12 noon, next to Beit Beirut, which itself is currently being turned into a war museum.

During the "memory stops," the route of which has not yet been finalized, UMAM will work alongside local NGOs and municipalities.

UMAM, an NGO dedicated to initiating collective reflection on

Lebanon's past, and founded in 2005, was never intended to focus solely on Greater Beirut, Slim added. As such it was natural that outreach projects be introduced, and the bus seemed like the perfect choice – allowing for mobility and acting as a bridge between the country's past and future.

Robert Watkins, UNDP resident representative in Lebanon, also spoke Thursday. While UNDP is largely focused on development, he said "you cannot build a society without a peaceful environment."

"The bus is an iconic image for the country and we think this project will help the population come to terms with what happened," Watkins added.

The UNDP always supports truth and reconciliation policies in countries with a history of civil conflict, he said.

Indeed, while the mobile unit is not a formal court with prosecutions, as witnessed in many other countries such as the former Yugoslavia, "it will help in coming to terms with the past and offers an important opportunity to reflect."

He added: "It has been said that time

## NGOS HOLD SIT-IN FOR CIVIL WAR MISSING

BEIRUT: Several NGOs will hold a sit-in Friday to express their solidarity with the Civil War missing and to remind politicians of their national duty to help resolve the issue and seek the truth.

The sit-in will take place in front of Parliament in Downtown Beirut at 10:30 a.m. on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975.

A statement released by the organizers said there are 17,000 citizens who are classified as missing or forcibly disappeared. Among the organizations' demands is the need to establish a national commission to reveal the fate of families' missing relatives and loved ones, currently a draft law awaiting approval by Parliament.

The NGOs include the Committee of Disappeared families, the Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE), and the Committee of the Families of Detainees in Syrian Prisons. – *The Daily Star*

heals all wounds, but this does not come from simply forgetting the past."

Speaking on behalf of the European Union's ambassador to Lebanon, Angelina Eichhorst, Diego Escalona-Paturel said that, "Coming from Spain, where discussions about the civil war are still ongoing after more than 70 years, I cannot but confirm the importance for any conflict-torn society to deal with its past in order to build a sustainable peace."

"This search is not easy and it inevitably brings back painful images of the past and unanswered questions. But it is worth it," Escalona-Paturel added.

Both Watkins and the EU representative praised the work of UMAM, and the support of the Lebanese government for the project.

"The neighbors of Lebanon may benefit from our incomplete 'peace'" Slim warned. "But we must start reading this past, even if we have differing opinions on it."