

Lebanese ready to fight next to Syrian 'brothers'

By Antonio Pampliega (AFP) – Jul 7, 2012

AL-QAA, Lebanon — About 20 armed men enter a dilapidated barn in northeastern Lebanon, preparing to sneak across the border and fight alongside their Syrian "brothers" against the regime in Damascus. The young men decide to rest briefly at the farm near Al-Qaa in the Bekaa Valley, their arms and baggage placed against a wall.

The volunteers aim is to join the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is made up mostly of Syrian army deserters.

Reclining on mattresses on the ground, they dip bread into tins of sardines or tuna, their evening meal. "We will cross the border to go to Idlib (in northwest Syria). The FSA is trying to retake the city and needs all the help it can get. Let's go for it," says Abdel Hakim says in decent English.

Like his comrades, the young man from the Baalbek region has dropped everything to go fight in Syria. For security reasons, they choose not to reveal their full identities.

"I worked in a mobile phone shop and with my savings I bought an old Kalashnikov on the black market and 10 magazines," Bilal says with a grin.

"This is the first time I leave Lebanon and it's to fight in Syria. I'm afraid when I see the images on TV but I'm prepared to die if God wills. For my family, it would be a honour if I became a martyr of the Syrian revolution," Bilal says.

"They are our brothers. We must rush to their help," he says.

"I live in a village controlled by (the pro-Syrian Shiite movement) Hezbollah. There, everyone supports President (Bashar al-) Assad and if you say otherwise you can get into a lot of trouble," Bilal says. He says the authorities in Lebanon have sided with Assad's regime.

"Lebanon plays an important role in what is happening in Syria. It closes its border and pursues those who support the FSA, while Shiite militiamen cross freely to fight alongside the regime. It's time to balance things out."

The most outwardly religious of the group, Osama Salem, spells out his goal.

"We are going to Syria to carry out jihad (holy war) with our Syrian brothers and overthrow the tyrant Assad ... Since the international community has chosen to do nothing ... it must be Muslims themselves who solve the problem."

He fingers his prayer beads while listening to the Koran on his mobile.

"You tell me that it's Al-Qaeda or Islamic fundamentalist groups fighting in Syria ... If they are, it's only your (the West's) fault for allowing Bashar al-Assad to stay in power by killing people," he says, stroking his beard.

Some young Syrians are also in the group. They live in the border area of Arsal, where they have fled in past months.

"Every Syrian family living in the region of Arsal has one or two members fighting for the FSA," says Zaid, explaining that families finance the purchase of weapons on the black market.

"We buy weapons from the soldiers of Bashar al-Assad. We buy assault rifles, grenades, RPGs, but now we need heavy weapons and missiles to destroy tanks and helicopters," he says.

"A Kalashnikov is good for killing people, but it is useless against an armoured vehicle," he says coldly.

"Here, nobody helps us. Neither Qatar nor Saudi Arabia give us money to buy weapons or ammunition. They help us by giving food," he says, referring to Assad's most outspoken Arab opponents.

International envoy Kofi Annan acknowledged the failure so far of his mission to bring peace to Syria, as more than 60 people were killed in violence on Saturday that also spilled over into Lebanon.

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