

Three Hezbollah fighters killed in arms depot blast

By Hussein Dakroub

BEIRUT: Three Hezbollah fighters were killed Wednesday when an explosion ripped through an arms depot in eastern Lebanon, the resistance party said in a statement.

The incident followed reports that a Hezbollah commander and several fighters had been killed in Syria by anti-regime rebels, in a development highlighting the party's involvement in the 18-month-old bloody conflict next door.

The rebel Free Syrian Army, which claimed responsibility for the killing of the Hezbollah commander, vowed what it called an "earthshaking response" against Hezbollah fighters for helping the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Hezbollah issued a terse statement explaining the explosion that took place in the eastern village of Nabi Sheet, a stronghold of the party.

Quoting sources from the resistance party, the statement said: "The explosion occurred in a depot where old shells and ammunition and remnants of the Israeli shelling in the area are assembled.

"This unfortunate blast led to the martyrdom of three of our mujahedeen brothers and a number of wounded," the statement said, adding that work was under way with relevant authorities to deal with the traces of the incident.

Earlier, security sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, told The Daily Star that around midday an explosion at a four-story building in Nabi Sheet, 30 kilometers south of Baalbek, killed at least three people and wounded four others.

The sources said the building, which belonged to a man identified as Mohammad Adnan Musawi, collapsed as a result of the magnitude of the explosion and that Hezbollah cordoned off the site soon after the blast.

Nabi Sheet lies 80 kilometers from Beirut. Known for its residents' staunch support for Hezbollah, the village was the hometown of former Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Abbas Musawi who was killed by an Israeli air raid in south Lebanon in 1992.

Similar explosions have occurred at Hezbollah's weapons depots in southern Lebanon in recent years, also causing casualties.

Hezbollah has strongly rejected repeated demands by the opposition March 14 parties to

surrender its arms to the Lebanese Army. The party, which keeps stockpiles of weapons, including thousands of rockets, said it needs the arms to defend Lebanon against a possible Israeli attack.

Meanwhile, the FSA claimed responsibility for the death of Hezbollah commander Ali Hussein Nassif, who was reportedly killed in Syria, in remarks published in a Saudi newspaper Wednesday.

“Members of the FSA ambushed Ali Hussein Nassif, also known as Abu Abbas, with an explosive device that killed him and two of his bodyguards in the Qusair area in Homs,” FSA commander Col. Riad al-Asaad told Okaz newspaper.

Lebanese security officials said Tuesday that Nassif and several Hezbollah fighters had been killed in Syria.

Hezbollah spokesman Ibrahim Musawi confirmed the deaths of two Hezbollah members but said he had no further information on where or how Nassif was killed.

In explaining the incident, a source close to the party said that a group of Hezbollah fighters were in a house in the Qusair area on the Syrian side of the border when a rocket crashed into the house at the weekend, killing four or five fighters and wounding one.

The Hezbollah fighters were tasked with monitoring the smuggling of arms and gunmen from Lebanon to Syria and vice versa, the source told The Daily Star.

Asaad, the FSA chief, said his rebel soldiers had planned the operation against Nassif for two weeks. “Members of the FSA tracked Abu Abbas for days until they were able to kill him while he was on his way to one of Hezbollah and Assad’s forces’ gatherings in the region,” Asaad said.

The FSA commander also vowed to conduct more attacks against Iranian and Hezbollah elements allegedly participating in the fighting in Syria.

“Anyone who supports the Assad regime is a partner in crime and deserves punishment,” he said. He claimed that more than 300 people affiliated to Iran and Hezbollah had already been killed in Qusair.

Later, the joint command of the FSA vowed in a statement an “earthshaking response” against Hezbollah fighters for helping the Assad regime. The statement carried by Elnashra website also promised Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah “surprises that will give him nightmares.”

Referring to the killing of Nassif, the FSA said: “We will have no mercy on anyone who kills or helps directly or indirectly in killing or suppressing the sons of our steadfast and revolting people by Assad’s gangs and shabbiha [armed thugs], the Iranian militias of the Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah, Al-Mahdi Army and others. Anyone who attacks our land and people will be digging his grave with his hands.”

Hezbollah, the primary ally of Syria and Iran in Lebanon, has long been accused by Syrian rebels of providing help to Assad and sending its fighters to support the regime forces in the war-torn country. However, the group has repeatedly denied such accusations.

Meanwhile, commenting on the explosion in Nabi Sheet, Deputy Speaker Farid Makari said in a statement after meeting Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea at his residence in Maarab, north of Beirut: "Out of my political convictions, had Hezbollah surrendered its arms to the Lebanese state, it would have spared the country trouble and would have secured to the state its arms needs."

Tripoli's MP Mohammad Kabbara from the parliamentary Future bloc said his bloc will ask the government through Parliament about Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict in Syria.

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