

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Syrian violence spreads across borders

By Alice Fordham, The Washington Post

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BEIRUT — Conflict in Syria burst over the borders into neighboring Lebanon and Turkey on Monday, with one Lebanese cameraman killed and at least four people, two Syrian and two Turkish, injured in fighting on the Syrian-Turkish border.

The violence, on the eve of the deadline of a fading U.N.-backed deal for Syrian troops to withdraw from cities and cease hostilities against a widespread uprising, provoked strong responses from Lebanese and Turkish officials and heightened already tense regional relations.

The incidents came less than two weeks after heavy fighting on the Syrian side of the border with Lebanon threatened to spill into the Qaa area of Lebanon.

With the populations in both Lebanon and Turkey deeply divided between those who support the opposition in Syria and those who still hope embattled President Bashar al-Assad will remain in power, some fear that such incidents could prove a spark in a combustible environment.

“I think we can expect more violence along the borders; I think that’s going to be the new normal,” said Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution in Doha. “The more refugees there are trying to escape, the more skirmishes there will be.”

Activists have reported heavy casualties in recent days, with 84 civilians killed Monday, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, along with 19 members of the security forces, and eight defectors. Hopes are rapidly disappearing that a six-point peace plan negotiated with Syrian authorities by U.N.-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan could halt the violence.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Monday, “These incidents are just another indication that the Assad regime does not seem at all willing to meet the commitments that it made to Kofi Annan. Not only has the violence not abated, it has been worse in recent days.”

Nuland said the Syrian government was trying to “stall for time” with its demand for a written guarantee that opposition forces would disarm before it withdraws troops from cities and towns. “This is just more chaff being thrown up in the air at the last minute to deflect attention from the fact that the regime is not meeting the commitments.”

The United Nations said in a statement that U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon “strongly deplores today’s fatal cross-border shootings from Syria into Turkey, as well as into Lebanon ... The Secretary-General reiterates his demand that the Government of Syria immediately cease all military actions against civilians and fulfil all of its commitments made through Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan.”

In Lebanon, Prime Minister Najib Mikati used Twitter to send condolences for the death of Ali Shaaban, part of a three-man crew with Lebanese television channel al-Jadeed, which was filming in the Wadi Khaled area of Lebanon on the country’s northern border with Syria.

The two surviving journalists, Hussein Khrais and Abdul Aziem Khayat, said in interviews with Lebanese media that they were in a car in Lebanon, filming and taking notes, when men in civilian clothes began shooting at them from the Syrian side of the border and continued to fire for two hours. Lebanese security forces then were able to rescue them, the journalists said.

Khrais said in a telephone interview that he was unable to identify whether the attackers were armed opponents of the Assad government or Syrian government forces. Mikati said via Twitter that he planned to inform Syrian authorities that he condemned the act, and that the Lebanese army would investigate the incident.

In Turkey, violence broke out as a group of dozens of Syrians — some wounded — sought to become the latest of more than 20,000 refugees to flee across the Turkish border, crossing near the Turkish village of Killis, north of the Syrian city of Aleppo.

About nine in the morning, the group was spotted making its way to the border, said a spokesman from the Turkish foreign ministry, and several Syrian nationals, along with a Turkish policeman and female Turkish translator, approached the border area to help them.

As the two groups met at the border, they were fired upon by unidentified gunmen in Syria, who injured the Syrian refugees, policeman and the translator on the Turkish side of the border. The group of refugees crossed into Turkey, where two men died immediately of their wounds. It could not be determined whether they had been shot as they entered the country, or earlier.

“We summoned the Syrian charge d’affaires in Ankara, and told him that every Syrian within Turkish territory was under Turkish protection, and we urged him that the fighting on the other side of the border stop,” said the spokesman, who did not give his name. “We said that if this repeats, we will take necessary measures.”

Syrian officials did not comment on the incidents but a state news agency reported that “a media source” said that the al-Jadeed team came under fire from a terrorist group, which also fired on Syrian soldiers. Syrian officials have repeatedly blamed violence on terrorists and foreign groups.

Turkish officials have called repeatedly for Assad to step down, saying that he has lost his legitimacy because his crackdown by the Syrian military on a year-long, partly armed uprising has killed thousands of unarmed civilians.

“I think all diplomatic options have been exhausted now – the international community has tried literally everything at its disposal,” Hamid said. If Turkey were backed by the U.S. and other Western nations, he added, then long-discussed “safe zones” on the Syrian side of the Turkish border could be the next step.

Special correspondent Suzan Haidamous in Beirut contributed to this report.