Arsal ambush kills two Lebanese soldiers hunting wanted fugitive

By Rakan al-Fakih

ARSAL, Lebanon: Two Lebanese soldiers and a wanted man were killed Friday when an Army patrol trying to apprehend the man was ambushed in the eastern town of Arsal near the border with Syria.

"In the afternoon, and while an Army patrol was hunting a man wanted for several terrorist acts on the outskirts of the town of Arsal, it was ambushed by gunmen," the Lebanese Army said in a statement.

"Clashes that erupted between the patrol members and gunmen resulted in the martyrdom of an officer with the rank of captain and a soldier, as well as the wounding of a number of military personnel," it added.

The statement said that a number of unidentified gunmen had also been wounded and several military vehicles had been badly damaged in the exchange of gunfire.

The Army identified the victims as Captain Pierre Bashalani, 31, and Sergeant Ibrahim Zahraman, 32.

The army later brought in reinforcements to seal off the area and hunt down the gunmen.

Earlier Friday, security sources told The Daily Star that at least four soldiers had been among five killed in the ambush in Arsal. They said at least six other members of the military had been wounded in the clashes.

The fifth fatality was a gunman, the sources said, adding that the incident was triggered by a Lebanese Army Intelligence attempt to arrest Khaled Hmayyed, a resident of Arsal.

Hmayyed was killed during clashes with Army Intelligence agents. In retaliation, gunmen in the area ambushed the Army patrol, the sources said.

The National News Agency reported that Hmayyed was wanted in the case of the seven Estonians who had been kidnapped in Lebanon and later released in 2011.

Arsal residents said the clashes started when more than 10 Army Intelligence agents in civilians clothes tried to arrest Hmayyed as worshippers left a mosque after Friday prayers.

The Army agents opened fire on Hmayyed when he tried to escape, hitting him in the leg. They

later took him in their civilian car and left Arsal to a location where two Army Humvees were waiting for them.

However, the rainfall delayed Hmayyed's handover to the Army, the residents said.

They added that when news of Hmayyed's capture spread, a number of armed residents headed to the location of the Army patrol where clashes with medium and light weapons as well as rocket-propelled grenades ensued, hitting the car that carried Hmayyed and killing him as well as Mashalani and Zahraman.

Arsal Mayor Ali Hujeiri said the Army patrol that came to arrest Hmayyed had done so without any coordination with the town's notables.

"The Army came to the town dressed in civilian clothing and the residents thought it was a gang that killed Hmayyed and not the authorities," the mayor told LBCI TV. He added that Hmayyed was not a "terrorist."

In its statement, the Army urged Arsal residents to cooperate fully with the measures the military would take in its efforts to apprehend the gunmen involved in the incident.

It also warned that it would not be lenient "with any attempt to smuggle or hide the gunmen, and those caught committing such acts will be subject to legal prosecution."

Defense Minister Fayez Ghosn condemned the Arsal incident, saying it amounted to an attack on the country's stability and security.

"What happened in Arsal today was very grave. Attacking the Army and its members is an attack on every citizen. We cannot keep silent on this," Ghosn said in a statement.

"The Lebanese Army will never be a scapegoat for anyone. Anyone who tries to attack the Army will not be safe from arrest and punishment," the minister added.