

## Hezbollah denies involvement in Arsal as town remains sealed

BEIRUT: Hezbollah Tuesday denied involvement in the Arsal incident that left two soldiers dead, as the Army said the man whose arrest sparked the clashes in the eastern town is connected to the militant Islamist Nusra Front.

“We vehemently deny any link with what happened and is now happening in Arsal,” Hezbollah MP Nawwar Sahili told reporters at Parliament, responding to remarks Future Movement MPs made over the weekend suggesting Hezbollah was behind fighting between soldiers and gunmen in the town.

He added that those who accuse the party of involvement want to “turn what happened into a sectarian conflict.” Those accusing the Army of bias or suggesting it cannot be trusted are doing so to “escape the responsibility of their provocation and to implicate Lebanon in incidents that could harm the country and thrust it into chaos.”

Expressing support for the Army, the lawmaker also addressed allegations that recently buried Hezbollah members had been involved in Arsal, saying: “There is no relationship whatsoever.”

He said one man died around the time of the Arsal incident “while fulfilling his jihadist duty,” and another man died after the killings in an accident.

For the fifth day, the Army maintained strict security at all Arsal entrances, checking the identification of residents on their way in and out of the town and searching all cars. Some Army units intensified patrols inside the town, but there were no raids on the homes of some 80 wanted men, one of whom is reportedly Arsal Mayor Ali al-Hujeiry.

When Brig. Gen. George Nader, commander of the Army’s airborne regiment, reached the entrance of Arsal after touring nearby military posts, he and other soldiers were greeted by schoolchildren bearing flowers. The soldiers hoisted the students onto their personnel carriers.

Head of Army Intelligence Brig. Gen. Edmond Fadel told reporters that the Army was planning its response to the “aggression” against it and said that although the Army “does not take vengeance ... [it] will not forget, and whoever attacks the Army is wanted.”

Fadel also elaborated on the events last Friday that led to the deaths of Captain Pierre Bashaalani, 31, and Sergeant Ibrahim Zahraman, 32, as well as the wounding of nine others.

The officer said an Army Intelligence patrol of two civilian cars surrounded the car of Khalid

Hmayyed, whom he described as “very dangerous; a professional with experience in criminal activities.”

Fadel added that Hmayyed worked with the Nusra Front, a “fundamentalist” group fighting with Syrian rebels, that played a role in the 2011 kidnapping of seven Estonians, and attacked an Internal Security Forces post near the Syrian border last November.

The general said that after Hmayyed shot at the patrol the Army retaliated and apprehended him. Snow and bad weather forced them to take to internal Arsal roads, and they drove into an ambush of some 80 men.

Fadel said the armed men took the wounded soldiers to Arsal’s municipality, where they beat them and showed off the bodies of Bashaalini and Zahraman in celebration. He said Hmayyed was “a major target and if he remained at large he would have affected the power of the state and stability in Lebanon.”

Various political forces weighed in on the ongoing events in the town, most expressing support for the Army and calling for a full investigation but taking different positions on the events that led up to the conflict.

After its weekly meeting, the Future parliamentary bloc said in a statement that “this dangerous and painful incident in Arsal has unveiled mistakes that worsened the situation [in Arsal] and disrupted the stability of the country through media campaigns and abhorrent sectarian provocation against the town and its residents.”

Expressing its opposition to any aggression against the Army, the bloc also urged an investigation, overseen by a military tribunal, “to unveil the facts of what happened, beginning with the killing of the victim Khaled Hmayyed, especially given the strange events that took place during the incident that need clarification.” The bloc also called on the Army to unseal the town.

Also calling for a transparent investigation and expressing support for the Army was Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt, who stressed that the Army “protects Lebanese of various sects, religions and affiliations.” Jumblatt said “any attempt to draw Arsal into a confrontation with the Lebanese Army will only lead to sectarian conflict.”

Controversial Sidon Sheikh Ahmad Assir held a sit-in in Sidon in support of Arsal, amid tight security measures.

He also questioned who dispatched the Army “to assassinate Khalid Hmayyed, knowing the circumstances in the country and Arsal.”

“Whoever gave this order is involved in the killing of the Lebanese Army and is the party that instigated this conflict between residents of Arsal and the Lebanese Army,” ultimately pointing the finger at Syrian President Bashar Assad and Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah and saying the “Iranian project” had infiltrated Army Intelligence.

Assir said that any military action against Arsal would be considered a move against the entire Sunni sect, and threatened escalation in the event the town was attacked.

Some men burned tires inside Arsal, and called for a Wednesday morning demonstration against

what they called the “siege” of the town.

Protesters caused road closures across the country Monday and Tuesday in solidarity with the Army; however the Army Monday urged people not to block roads.

Among those expressing condolences for the deaths of the Army personnel was U.S. military attaché Colonel David Brener, who visited Lebanese Army commander Gen. Jean Kahwagi.

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