

Three soldiers injured in Arsal clash

By Rakan al-Fakih

BEIRUT: Three soldiers were injured Friday when a protest against strict security measures in the Bekaa town and the arrest of 11 men from the area turned violent.

The incident at a Lebanese Army checkpoint renewed tensions that first flared earlier this month when a group of armed men ambushed an Army patrol, killing two soldiers and wounding nine others.

At least 100 men attempted to block a road with flaming tires across from a checkpoint shortly after Friday prayers, in protest against the ongoing security measures at the town. The Army has encircled Arsal, and is searching anyone who enters or exits.

The attempted road closure prompted soldiers to fire tear gas at the protesters, who responded by hurling stones toward the checkpoint.

In a statement Friday, the Army said it had arrested 11 men in Arsal, including four Syrian nationals, for possession of arms as part of its crackdown on the smuggling of weapons and illegal goods.

The Army added that it seized arms, ammunition and other military gear the men had in their possession, and handed the detainees and confiscated items to the relevant authorities.

The statement said the arrests were part of the Army's crackdown on wanted individuals, and contributed to efforts to counter cross-border infiltration and smuggling.

Security sources told The Daily Star that some of the arrested men were transferred to a nearby Army barracks and others were taken to the Defense Ministry in Baabda's Yarze village.

According to the sources, some of the arrested men in Arsal include Abdullah Mohammad Hujeiri, Khaled Mohammad Hujeiri, Rabih Hassan Raed and Ali Hasan Raed.

The Army said troops would continue to pursue "other individuals" involved in "destabilizing the country" and killing Captain Pierre Bashaalani, 31, and Sergeant Ibrahim Zahraman, 32.

The clash took place after Islamist figures in the town called for a demonstration at noon in front of Arsal's municipal building.

The protest was headed by the influential Lebanese Salafist Sheikh Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, and Sheikh Mustafa al-Hujeiri from Arsal.

“The Sunnis in this country are at the forefront of the fight against the oppression and tyranny of the Syrian-Iranian axis,” Shahhal said.

The sheikh complained that the security measures have hurt residents seeking to make a living, especially those involved in the quarrying industry, due to the extensive searches the Army is carrying out on vehicles passing in and out the town.

Future Movement officials did not attend the protest, saying that they would not participate in any activities that did not help reach a positive solution to the town’s crisis.

“The Future Movement’s boycott of this demonstration is meant to spread calm in the area, and turn in the wanted men to the Army,” said Bakr Hujeiri, a Future Movement official in Aرسال.

But Bakr called on the Army to ease its measures around the town and avoid insulting the residents who have to travel in and around Aرسال every day.

“The situation in the town is still under control and we call on all sides to help end this crisis so as to bring life in Aرسال back to normal,” Bakr said.

Following Friday prayers in Tripoli, a group of Islamist protesters marched to the city’s Nour Square and called on the Army to pull back from Aرسال.

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