

Three Hezbollah fighters, 12 Syrian rebels killed in clashes

By Rakan al-Fakih

HERMEL, Lebanon: Three Hezbollah fighters and 12 Syrian rebels were killed in fierce battles near Syria's border with Lebanon, security sources said Sunday, as the Syrian opposition accused the party of "military intervention" in the neighboring country's bloody conflict.

The fighting, the worst near the border with Lebanon since the uprising erupted in Syria nearly two years ago, underlined Hezbollah's increasing involvement in the Syrian crisis. It also renewed fears of the Syrian conflict between government troops and opposition groups fighting to topple the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad spilling over into Lebanon.

"In the past two days, 12 Syrian rebels were killed and 30 wounded, while three Hezbollah members were killed and 14 others were wounded in battles," a Lebanese security source told The Daily Star.

Speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation, the source said the fighting between Hezbollah and rebels in the Syrian region of Qusayr, where many Lebanese Shiites reside, has intensified since Friday.

Qusayr is located just across the northeastern border with Lebanon.

Although there are an estimated 30,000 Lebanese Shiites who live in a cluster of 20 Syrian villages near the border with Lebanon, many have fled to the eastern cities of Hermel and Baalbek and Beirut because of the violence.

During the battles that raged with Syrian rebels over the weekend in Qusayr, Hezbollah fighters managed to impose their control on some territory and houses vacated by residents of Shiite villages, the source said. The homes had been vacated during confrontations between the two sides several months ago, the source added.

The source added that two artillery shells fired by Syrian rebels landed inside the Lebanese town of Qasr on the border with Syria, causing no casualties. The first shell did not explode, while the other one hit the wall of Ali Hussein Zuaiter's house.

A source close to Hezbollah in Hermel confirmed the clashes with Syrian rebels in Shiite villages. He said that Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah had previously referred to these clashes when he said that Lebanese Shiite residents were defending themselves against attacks by Syrian rebels.

Blaming the Syrian opposition for the outbreak of fighting, the source said that the villages which Hezbollah members are defending are not located in the center of Syria, but are near the border and their residents are Lebanese.

But Hadi al-Abdallah of the Syrian Revolution General Commission said fighting broke out Saturday after Hezbollah fighters, who control eight Syrian border villages, tried to expand their sphere by moving into three adjacent Sunni villages that were in the hands of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

“The Hezbollah force moved on foot and was supported by multiple rocket launchers. The Free Syrian Army had to call in two tanks that had been captured from the Assad army to repel the attack,” Abdallah told Reuters.

Sgt. Muhieddine al-Zein, the head of the rebel Military Council in Qusayr, said the fighting erupted when a group of Hezbollah fighters tried to sneak into rebel-held areas. The rebels engaged with them and killed about 20 Hezbollah fighters, he told The Daily Star by telephone from Qusayr.

Zein said there are 13 brigades operating in Qusayr, adding that the Hezbollah fighters were recognized through the party’s flag and Syria’s flag. Zein claimed that Hezbollah fighters have been there since the beginning of the conflict. Zein said eight FSA members were killed, along with a woman and her two small children in the clashes with Hezbollah.

Hezbollah has repeatedly denied that it is sending members to fight alongside government forces against the opposition.

However, the party occasionally announces the death of one of its fighters killed “carrying out his jihadist duty,” but without clarification. In October 2012, Nasrallah acknowledged that party members had fought Syrian rebels but said they were acting as individuals and not under the party’s direction.

Nasrallah said that a Hezbollah commander by the name of Ali Hussein Nassif was killed in a Syrian border area inhabited by Lebanese that was frequently the target of bombardment by Syrian rebels.

Meanwhile, the main bloc of the Syrian opposition Sunday accused Hezbollah of “militarily intervention” in Syria, and called it a danger to regional peace and security.

The Syrian National Council said Hezbollah members Saturday attacked “three Syrian villages in the Qusayr region near the Lebanese border” with full knowledge of the regular Syrian army.

The operation in Homs province led not only to “civilian casualties and the exodus of hundreds of people,” but also “stoked sectarian tensions” in the area, the SNC said in a statement. The SNC said Hezbollah was employing “heavy weapons openly and under the auspices of the Syrian regime army.” – Additional reporting by Lauren Williams and AFP