

Hezbollah blames Future for Abra

By Mohammed Zaatari

SIDON, Lebanon: Hezbollah blamed the Future Movement Sunday for “every drop of blood that fell in Abra,” in the party’s first detailed response to clashes between the Army and Salafi militants last week. “We call on the Future Movement to stop betting on strife,” Sheikh Nabil Qaouq, the deputy head of Hezbollah’s political council, said at a memorial ceremony in Sidon. “We call on the Future Party to stop the language of sectarian incitement.”

Militants loyal to preacher Ahmad Assir ambushed Lebanese Army soldiers last week. In the ensuing battle, the military took control of Assir’s security perimeter around the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque in the Sidon suburb of Abra, and the preacher fled.

“The Army, with the blood of its soldiers and officers protected the dignity, sovereignty and safety of the Lebanese,” Qaouq said. “The Lebanese Army saved Lebanon from major strife, and Sidon was the first to be saved by the Army.”

He denied Hezbollah had taken part in the “shelling” of Sidon or in arresting any citizens, calling such claims “fabrications and deception and an insistence on fueling the flames of strife.”

Some have accused Hezbollah of participating in the battle against Assir. Hezbollah supporters and affiliates have frequently clashed with the firebrand preacher, who condemned the party’s involvement in the conflict in neighboring Syria.

Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah’s deputy secretary-general, echoed Qaouq’s argument.

“Incitement against the Army and the Resistance and encouraging strife is what led the situation in Sidon to explode,” he said, adding that the Future Movement and other groups that seek to sow strife are to blame for the situation reaching the level of “undermining civil peace and

stability.”

Meanwhile Abra residents returning over the weekend were coming to terms with the destruction that tarred their neighborhood, with many families finding their homes, which were damaged in the fighting, systematically looted.

Sidon officials, led by former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and lawmaker Bahia Hariri submitted a memo to President Michel Sleiman detailing the city’s security, logistical, social and economic demands in the aftermath of the fighting.

The memo’s top demand was related to the Army’s crackdown after the fighting subsided against alleged Assir supporters, which prompted concerns about arbitrary detention.

The Army released a second batch of 29 detainees, after earlier releasing 25 whose involvement in the Abra events was not proven.

Future steps at reconciliation will also include the release of the bodies of individuals killed in the fighting who have yet to be identified.

Army and local Sidon officials, as well as a representative of the Higher Relief Council, began a tour Sunday of the southern city to assess the damage from the fighting.

Tractors began removing rubble and debris as well as clearing the road leading up to the scene of the clashes at the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque.

Management of the mosque was transferred Saturday to Sidon’s Mufti Salim Sousan and Sheikh Mohammad Abu Zeid, the mosque’s new imam.

Sousan led noon prayers at the mosque Sunday.

“This mosque will be opened and will be like Sidon’s mosques that have taught people goodness, patriotism, heroism, peace and stability,” Sheikh Sousan told reporters after the prayers.

“This mosque will return to fulfill its role in serving Islam and Muslims, this mosque will reaffirm its role in protecting civil peace and national consensus and co-existence in this Lebanese society, which is diverse in its sects and beliefs.”

The mufti said he was following the issue of those detained by the Army, and pledged to work on

returning the city to normalcy.

Sheikh Sousan said he rejected all armed presence in Sidon except “the weapons of the state, order, law, legitimacy and the Lebanese Army.”

When asked to comment on whether Assir was a terrorist, Sheikh Sousan declined.

Dozens of activists and youth in the city launched the “Beykaffy Khawf” (Enough Fear) campaign to clean up Sidon and assist in rehabilitating its citizens. The campaign’s mission statement reaffirms the right for civil peace, with duties and rights, within the state.

“Our goal is to issue a civil, patriotic shout from Sidon to all of Lebanon to say what happened in Sidon does not represent us or our culture,” said Heba Haneena, the campaign’s coordinator. “Since fear controls most of us and threatens our peace and our families’ peace and our future, we came out to say we are not fearful and nobody should be scared.”

“We want to break the fear barrier in everyone so we can build a nation that befits us and our dreams,” she added.

March 14 MPs visited Sidon on Sunday and met with MP Bahia Hariri to express support for the city.

MP Marwan Hamade, who was present, expressed rejection of “the transgressions of what is called the Resistance Brigades and any transgressions by any branches of the security services.”

The Resistance Brigades, a pro-Hezbollah group, clashed recently with Assir supporters, prompting the deployment of the Lebanese Army in Abra days before last week’s fighting.

Hariri met the families of individuals arrested or missing in recent days, and reached out to security agencies to help determine their fates.

A video that circulated on the Internet Thursday showing Army soldiers abusing a detainee caused outrage and concern over how those who have been arrested were being treated.