

Sidon officials try to bury the hatchet after Abra violence

By Mohammed Zaatari

SIDON, Lebanon: Talks are underway to put an end to tensions that have soared between residents of the mostly Sunni city of Sidon and its primarily Shiite suburb Haret Saida in the aftermath of clashes that rocked the Abra neighborhood last month. The latest round held Thursday, was chaired by Sidon Mayor Mohammad al-Saudi and had two objectives: to reduce tensions and promote reconciliation between the neighborhoods, and to help the most affected residents repair their homes.

“We denounce the criminal act that happened in the southern suburbs, as we denounce every criminal act that targets the security and the well-being of citizens, their lives and their civil peace,” Saudi said.

The meeting at the city’s municipal building was attended by the mayors and mukhtars of Abra, Haret Saida, Hlalieh and Salhieh – all neighborhoods affected by the recent battle in Abra between the Army and supporters of Salafist Sheikh Ahmad Assir. Representatives of civil society organizations and local groups were also present.

“We want a strong and just state which is capable of serving all its citizens,” Saudi said. “We are also committed to supporting our national Army which is the vertebral column of this nation to keep it united.”

“Our civil peace is a red line, so is the security of the city and its vicinity. Only the legal institutions should take the responsibility of safeguarding the security of this country,” he added.

The Shiite mayor of Haret Saida, Samih al-Zein, saluted Saudi’s remarks, saying: “What Saudi

has said expresses our opinion also.”

Saudi also addressed the issue of repairing material damage caused during the fighting, announcing that the rehabilitation work in Abra would be funded by a donation from former Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

He said the Higher Relief Committee had reached an agreement with construction company Genico, owned by Sidon MP Bahia Hariri’s brother Shafik, to start work on the structural restoration of all the damaged buildings and properties.

The mayor went on to say that efforts to survey the damages in Taamir on the outskirts of the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp were nearing completion and that there could be cash compensations for residents to repair their homes.

Saudi expressed hope that all the displaced residents of Abra and the surrounding areas would be able to return to their homes before Eid al-Fitr, the holiday to mark the end of Ramadan that this year falls in early August.

Also present at the meeting was the head of the Al-Rahma center, a charity organization in Abra that provides support to female high-school dropouts.

The organization has accused men from Haret Saida of targeting the center during the recent fighting, leaving the building heavily damaged.

“Following the battle between the Lebanese Army and Assir supporters in Abra, Al-Rahma center was pounded from Mar Elias hill with machine guns, artillery, shells and rocket-propelled grenades. The shelling caused great damages to Al-Rahma social center,” a statement issued by the organization said.

“The armed men didn’t only do this, they also broke into the offices on Sunday night and removed the doors. They damaged the offices and their contents. They broke computers, furniture, photocopiers and screens. They also damaged the electric wires and stole many items when they left on Monday at dawn.”

The organization has estimated the cost of repairing the damages will come to more than \$150,000.

At the meeting, the center’s head, Ahmad Jardali, condemned the attacks, sparking a

discussion on why a humanitarian, nonpolitical organization had been targeted.

All parties present denounced those that had attacked the center.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Jardali urged all relevant parties to investigate what had happened and to shoulder their responsibilities.

Back inside the meeting, the secretary of the local societies gathering, Majed Hamto, saluted the positive role being played by the municipalities of the region to reconstruct homes and foster peace.

He also emphasized the great responsibility local officials have toward those residents whose homes have been damaged and destroyed.

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