

Sidon leaders demand post-Abra probe

By Mohammed Zaatari, Antoine Amrieh

SIDON/TRIPOLI, Lebanon: Sidon politicians and religious figures demanded Friday the authorities open a thorough investigation into recent clashes in their city and their aftermath, on a day that saw protests throughout the country against the crackdown.

Former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his fellow Sidon MP Bahia Hariri, joined by Sidon Mayor Mohammad Saudi and the city's mufti, Sheikh Salim Sousan, delivered a memo to President Michel Sleiman at Baabda Palace, and then visited caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati at the government Serail in Beirut to press their demands.

The commander of the Army, Gen. Jean Kahwagi, and the head of Army Intelligence, Brig. Gen. Edmond Fadel, were also on hand for the meeting.

Speaking afterward, Siniora said in the wake of the Army's offensive against firebrand preacher Sheikh Ahmad Assir earlier this week, Sidon was being subjected to a campaign of "arbitrary arrests" while armed groups affiliated with Hezbollah had returned to the city, "in even bigger numbers and with all of their weapons and equipment."

The confrontation between the Army and Assir's followers in Abra, a suburb of Sidon, began Sunday when the sheikh's fighters ambushed an Army checkpoint. The ensuing two-day battle killed 18 soldiers and at least 28 gunmen. Assir's whereabouts are unknown.

Speaking after the meeting with Mikati, Siniora said that the delegation had sensed, particularly from Kahwagi, a "strong determination to look into all of the violations, and investigate them thoroughly."

"There should be full respect for human rights – we're not in Guantanamo," Siniora said, adding

that some Sidonians had informed him the human rights violations in the city had no precedent, “not even in the days of the Israeli occupation.”

Siniora said that he was given a list of the detainees during the meeting.

The delegation, and Mikati, said they rejected any attack on the Army, but complained about a series of “human rights violations – there have been beatings and torture, which led to the death of some people.”

“It’s not the Army alone that is arresting people; there are military centers, and raids being carried out by Hezbollah and [its ally] the Resistance Brigades; they are doing horrible things to the people of Sidon,” he said.

During the meeting, Mikati expressed his support for the Army, but called on its leadership to put “a quick and immediate end to any actions or violations, which might be exploited.”

He appeared to be referring to a video that emerged on YouTube this week purporting to show soldiers beating a detainee in Sidon.

“There are those responsible for the attack on the Army who should be held accountable by the judiciary. But there are innocent people who have nothing to do with what happened and they must not be harmed,” Mikati added.

The army announced Thursday that it had turned over an unspecified number of soldiers to the military judiciary for an investigation into the incident.

For her part, Hariri said that Sunday’s eruption of violence in Abra reminded her of the day her brother, former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, was assassinated, because “the entire country was threatened.”

Hariri has demanded an investigation into claims that a Sidon man, Nader Bayoumi, was tortured to death by the Army during a crackdown on Assir.

Earlier in the day, protests and sit-ins took place in Tripoli, Akkar, Beirut and the Bekaa Valley, to express outrage over the aftermath of the clashes in Abra.

In Tripoli, gunmen took to the streets and fired shots into the air as demonstrators gathered in solidarity with Assir.

A similar protest in solidarity with Assir was also held in the Tariq al-Jadideh neighborhood of Beirut organized by Hizb ut-Tahrir.

In Sidon, Mufti Sousan led Friday prayers at the Zaatari Mosque, with Siniora in attendance, and demanded an investigation into the Abra clashes and their aftermath.

In his Friday sermon, Sousan said he rejected the use of weapons by any political party.

“We reject outright the use of weapons regardless to which side they belong or under any name, except state weapons,” Sousan said.

Attending the Sidon prayer was Sheikh Ahmad al-Zein, a judge known for his pro-Hezbollah stances. Some in the crowd called for Zein to be removed and killed as they chanted slogans against Hezbollah and its leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah and his ally Iran.

Many Sunni officials across Lebanon have accused Hezbollah of fighting alongside the Lebanese Army in its battle against Assir. The military denied the claims, saying it fought alone.

After the prayer, hundreds of protesters forced their way into Assir’s building complex in the Abra suburb. The Army failed to stop the protesters with a volley of gunfire in the air.

Journalists from The Daily Star, An-Nahar and the Reuters news agency were harassed or assaulted by protesters at the Sidon rally, while in Tripoli, an MTV television crew was prevented from covering the protests.

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