

Attack on sheikhs could trigger strife, Lebanon mufti warns

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Grand Mufti Mohammad Rashid Qabbani warned Monday that the recent attacks on four Muslim preachers could trigger a sectarian conflict in the country.

"To all I say, this is how strife begins," Qabbani said at Beirut's Makassed Hospital after visiting Sheikh Mazen Hariri and Sheikh Ahmad Fekhran, two Sunni scholars who were attacked in Beirut's Khandak al-Ghamik Sunday evening shortly after leaving the Mohammad al-Amin Mosque in the downtown area.

In a separate incident Sunday, Sheikh Ibrahim Abd al-Lattif and Sheikh Omar Imani were attacked in Shiyah on their way to Chtaura in the Bekaa Valley.

The attacks on the Muslim preachers, scholars at Dar al-Fatwa – Lebanon's highest Sunni Authority – almost plunged the country into chaos after road blockades were put up in Beirut as well as in the southern city of Sidon and in east Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

The Lebanese Army, however, swiftly moved to arrest the perpetrators.

Qabbani blamed the attack on the various Lebanese leaders – Shiites and Sunnis – in the country and linked the beatings to unrest in neighboring Syria.

"Shiite political and military leaders and Sunni leaders, too, and all other Lebanese leaders are responsible for what has happened," he said in a fiery speech to reporters at the Beirut hospital.

"Lebanon is being targeted with the purpose of dragging it into the regional fire [conflict]," Qabbani said.

“There is a big conspiracy against us and we must prevent this strife at the outset.”

He called on Lebanon's Shiite sect to stop its support for the assailants.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati, for his part, said political rhetoric was to blame for the culture of violence.

“What happened last night reaffirms the need that all parties in Lebanon stop firing up [their partisans] and stop the tense rhetoric instead of trying to evade collective responsibility to protect the country and throw unsubstantiated accusations on the government,” Mikati said in a statement.

He linked Sunday's attacks to the tension in the country over the crisis in Syria.

“We repeat that the dangerous situation in the region and its present and possible repercussions on Lebanon cannot be confronted except through all sides coming together once more at the National Dialogue table without preconditions in order to [defuse the situation] on the street,” he said.

Rival political parties in Lebanon are particularly divided over the conflict in neighboring Syria, with the March 14 alliance voicing support to Syrians seeking to end the rule of President Bashar Assad and the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition strongly supporting the embattled Syrian leader.

Mikati held rival political parties responsible for preventing tension on the streets.

“All parties, whether opponents or loyalists to [Damascus], have the prime responsibility of controlling the street and seeing to it that their supporters are not dragged into the tense situation,” added Mikati, who along with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri is in Rome to attend the inauguration of Pope Francis.

President Michel Sleiman, for his part, condemned the “flagrant” attack on the sheikhs and called for justice to take its course.

Sleiman, who is currently on a West Africa tour, telephoned Qabbani as well as the defense and interior ministers, urging them to “impose strict punishments on the perpetrators.”

Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri also warned against strife and said President Bashar Assad would not hesitate to “use the blood of Lebanese” to save his government from falling.

“Some are working in secret and in public to plunge Lebanon into a series of suspicious incidents and shameful acts, such as the attack against the sheikhs in Beirut and the southern suburb,” said Hariri, according to a statement from his office.

Earlier Monday, Interior Minister Marwan Charbel also blamed Lebanese political and religious leaders for the deterioration of the security situation in the country.

“This is exactly what I have been worried about. I have repeatedly warned that the edgy political and sectarian rhetoric, particularly from religious figures, is very dangerous,” Charbel told the Voice of Lebanon radio station.

“The situation could easily turn [to the worse],” he said.

Qabbani's office said Monday the mufti received separate phone calls from Sleiman and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, each stressing that they were exerting extensive efforts to uncover the identity of the perpetrators.

The interior minister stressed Monday that political leaders held the key to solving the security crisis.

“The solution is in the hands of all Lebanese politicians. The solution begins with them by meeting at Parliament under the slogan of [maintaining] ‘security in the country,’” Charbel said.

He also stressed that security forces were able to carry out their mission and achieve desired goals when leaders halted providing “political cover.”

At least five people were arrested for taking part in the Sunday attacks, which took place in the two majority Shiite Beirut neighborhoods of Shiyah and Khandak al-Ghamik.

“A Lebanese Army patrol raided the houses of the assailants and managed to arrest five of them,” a statement from the Lebanese Army command said.

It said judicial authorities were interrogating the detainees.

The statement said the Army was still in pursuit of the remaining suspects.

Charbel said the attackers had no political affiliations, but described them as drug addicts with criminal records.

Also commenting on the attack, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea voiced appreciation that Hezbollah and the Amal Movement had condemned the incident, but said more needed to be done on their part.

“This [denunciation] must be coupled with support for security forces to arrest all the perpetrators,” Geagea said in a statement.

He urged protesters not to block roads “but remain calm,” noting that knee jerk reactions did not serve the logic of the state.

The Druze Spiritual Council also denounced Sunday’s attacks and warned that such violence would lead to discord.

“Such suspicious acts are totally rejected and they constitute a dangerous threat to civil peace that could ultimately lead to strife,” The council said in a statement.

Shiite scholar Sayyed Ali Fadlallah joined the denunciation of the attacks and called for holding a Sunni-Shiite meeting to prevent attempts at igniting strife.

“The attacks against the Muslim scholars are an attack against us all and not just a particular sect,” said Fadlallah.

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