

Future blames Syrian regime for attacks on sheikhs

By Hussein Dakroub

BEIRUT: The Future parliamentary bloc Tuesday accused the Syria regime of standing behind the attacks on Muslim scholars that threatened to ignite a sectarian conflict, as the Army commander vowed to nip strife in the bud.

Also Tuesday, Sunni and Shiite religious leaders met in an attempt to stave off the repercussions of the assault on four Sunni sheikhs, while the state prosecutor said seven suspects were detained for their alleged involvement in the incident that threatened to sink Lebanon into sectarian violence.

The opposition Future bloc strongly denounced the attacks on the Sunni sheikhs and urged the government to refer the incident to the Supreme Judicial Council “because it is a crime that threatens civil peace in Lebanon.” The Judicial Council, the country’s highest judicial authority, is tasked with looking into crimes that threaten civil peace.

The bloc renewed its demand for the formation of a “neutral Cabinet” to pull the country out of “this obnoxious polarization and suspicious sectarian and confessional incitement.”

The bloc indirectly blamed the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad for the attacks on the Sunni sheikhs in a bid to divert attention away from the violent crackdown against the Syrian people. It said the attacks were carried out by “hired elements” with the aim of inciting Sunni-Shiite strife and inter-Lebanese divisions.

“This crime, as it appears, was carried out by someone seeking to blow up the situation in Lebanon. We have previously witnessed repeated and known attempts that were exposed and foiled and were in the framework of the Syrian regime’s scheme to transport its crisis outside its

border by destabilizing Lebanon in order to divert attention away from what it is doing against the Syrian people,” the bloc said in a statement issued after its weekly meeting chaired by former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

It was referring to the case of former Minister Michel Samaha, who was indicted by a military tribunal last year along with two senior Syria officers in a terror plot aimed at destabilizing Lebanon. Samaha, a longtime ally of Assad, was arrested by the Internal Security Forces’ Information Branch last year on charges of transporting explosives from Syria and plotting terror attacks in Lebanon aimed at killing political and religious figures.

The Future bloc urged the Lebanese to be wary of “conspiracies” being hatched against their security, unity and coexistence.

“Lebanon’s enemies are known and they stand behind what happened [Sunday] with the aim of rekindling strife among the sons of the one house and the one country,” the statement said, in an apparent reference to the Assad regime which has been accused by March 14 parties of responsibility for a string of bombings in the past that targeted the coalition’s lawmakers and politicians, including the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Army Commander Gen. Jean Kahwagi told a delegation from the Future bloc that the military was determined to prevent sectarian strife.

“The Army is ready to face various eventualities and is resolved to nip strife in the bud. It will strongly and firmly confront those seeking to play havoc with the citizens’ security and stability,” Kahwagi said.

In another statement, Kahwagi said rising sectarian tensions that followed the attacks on Sunni sheikhs posed the “most dangerous security challenge” to Lebanon since Hariri’s assassination.

Referring to hundreds of people who took to the streets in Beirut and other areas in the past two days, blocking roads with burning tires and garbage containers to protest the assaults on the Sunni sheikhs, Kahwagi said in remarks published by As-Safir newspaper Tuesday: “What happened showed clearly where the sectarian, political and confessional incitement happening around the clock could lead.”

The delegation of Future MPs also visited ISF chief Maj. Gen. Ashraf Rifi to follow up on the attacks on the Sunni sheikhs. The MPs called in a statement on the Army commander “to strike

with an iron fist against anyone who seeks to tamper with Lebanon's security, stability and civil peace and foment strife."

Earlier Tuesday, Prosecutor General Judge Hatem Madi said seven suspects were detained in connection with the attacks on the Sunni scholars.

"I ordered the detention of seven suspects in the [two] attacks against Muslim scholars and there could be further detentions depending on the course of the investigation," Madi told The Daily Star.

He said four of the suspects were detained over Sunday's attack on Sheikh Mazen Hariri and Sheikh Ahmad Fekhran in Khandaq al-Ghamiq in Beirut. The other three were detained over their suspected involvement in the attack on Sheikh Ibrahim Abed al-Latif Hussein and Sheikh Omar Imany in Shiyah.

Meanwhile, a delegation from the Higher Shiite Council met with Grand Mufti Sheikh Mohammad Rashid Qabbani in a step aimed at defusing sectarian tensions following the attacks on the Sunni scholars.

Grand Jaafarite Shiite Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Qabalan, who led the delegation to Dar al-Fatwa – Lebanon's highest Sunni religious authority – said the visit was designed to show solidarity with the mufti's stance and express condemnation of the attacks on the Sunni scholars.

"We affirmed with the mufti the prohibition of Muslim blood shedding at the hands of another Muslim and the prohibition of Sunni-Shiite strife that we must work on confronting," Qabalan told reporters with the mufti standing next to him.

"We also affirmed the prohibition of strife among all the Lebanese."

Qabbani said those behind the attacks had failed in their objective to incite Sunni-Shiite strife. "Those who planned the attack on some Sunni scholars had imagined that Sunni-Shiite strife had begun and that it would snowball, but they and those standing behind them were disappointed," he added.

Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun condemned the attacks on Sunni sheikhs and praised Qabbani's call for defusing sectarian tensions.

"We are waiting for justice to take its course quickly so that punishment can serve as a deterrent

force and those [who carried out the attacks] will not renew their crimes, threaten civil peace and push [the country] toward strife,” Aoun told reporters after chairing a weekly meeting of his parliamentary Change and Reform bloc.

“There is a conspiracy against Lebanon and they want to take us to chaos,” Aoun added.

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20/03/2013

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