

Army ends weekend clashes in Tripoli

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TRIPOLI, Lebanon: With the Army heavily deployed, a steady calm spread throughout the northern city of Tripoli at dawn Sunday, following three days of intense fighting between supporters and opponents of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Syria Street, which separates the city's rival neighborhoods of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, slowly came to life as Christians celebrated Palm Sunday in different parts of the conflict-ridden city.

The Army's overnight plan was launched shortly after 1 a.m. Sunday and proved effective as gunmen quickly withdrew from the war-torn streets. The cease-fire was maintained by both sides after the Army sent stark warnings that it would not tolerate an armed presence in either neighborhood.

The Army's plan came hours after President Michel Sleiman officially accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Najib Mikati's government.

Tripoli residents woke up Sunday to survey the damage caused by the clashes between Sunni and Alawite gunmen, and many spent hours assessing the damage inflicted on their properties.

"They stopped fighting today, but who will compensate [us] for the damages we suffered from the bullets and the rockets?" a resident who lives near Bab al-Tabbaneh told reporters.

People who suffered from the explosion in Ashrafieh [in Beirut] got compensation, what about us? Why don't we get compensated?" said the resident, who wished to remain anonymous.

Sunday's cease-fire came after intense fighting over a period of three days between pro- and anti-

Syrian regime groups.

This round of clashes claimed the lives of 12 people and injured scores more, security sources said Sunday.

The sources said most of the fatalities, including a soldier, were the result of sniper fire that kept most residents indoors Saturday night, when clashes between the rival neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen rekindled after a tenuous cease-fire was put in place. This round of fighting between Bab al-Tabbaneh, a neighborhood with a majority Sunni population that supports the uprising in Syria, and Jabal Mohsen, where the Lebanese Alawite community resides, erupted Thursday.

At around 9 p.m. Saturday, the Army carried out several raids in the two neighborhoods as part of their plan to clear the streets of gunmen, the sources said.

While they did not apprehend the fighters, soldiers did confiscate a large number of weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns.

Clashes between the two sides renewed at around midnight Saturday and continued for a period of two hours before tapering off again.

The once bustling streets of downtown Tripoli were deserted Sunday. Most residents said they were shocked and exhausted by the events.

“People here are living in tragic circumstances,” one resident told The Daily Star. “My 12-year-old daughter could not sleep all night because of the sound of gunfire.”

Residents from the country’s second-biggest city voiced particular alarm, saying unlike previous rounds of clashes between the neighborhoods, Salafist militants had joined the fighters in Bab al-Tabbaneh.

They linked the appearance of Salafist fighters to the recent government fallout over extending the term of Internal Security Forces commander Maj. Gen. Ashraf Rifi, who hails from the city and retires April 1.

Caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who is also from Tripoli, said his decision to resign came after ministers failed to pass a law extending Rifi’s term or to form an elections supervisory committee.

Meanwhile, the Army vowed to apprehend the “killers” of the slain soldier, Wissam Diab. His funeral was held Sunday in his hometown in South Lebanon.

Reading a statement on behalf of Army head Gen. Jean Kahwagi during the funeral ceremony, Col. Adnan Ezzeddine said the military “would not rest until it captures the criminals and bring them to justice.”

“Wissam’s martyrdom was for the sake of every citizen in these difficult circumstances that the nation is going through,” he said. Ezzeddine, quoting Kahwagi, also called on the people to remain committed to peaceful coexistence.

Interior Minister Marwan Charbel, who visited Tripoli Saturday, warned the situation there was dire and urged Parliament to take steps to help curb the violence.

“There are some who want trouble in Lebanon, some media [outlets] being among them, but there is something more important and what is happening in Tripoli is [grave] and is linked to regional [developments],” he said, referring to the Syrian conflict.

“We hope there will be a genuine understanding. I have faith in Speaker Nabih Berri and urge him to convene a session of Parliament to sign a pact that has the headline ‘Security in Lebanon,’ particularly in Tripoli,” he added.

Residents of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen have been fighting on and off since 2008. However, tensions and clashes between both sides have increased in frequency and intensity since the Syrian uprising began in 2011.

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