

Lebanon boils after sheikh killing

By Hussein Dakroub

21/05/2012

BEIRUT/TRIPOLI, Lebanon: Fears grew over the stability of north Lebanon Sunday after soldiers shot dead a prominent anti-Assad Muslim preacher and a companion at a Lebanese Army checkpoint in Akkar, triggering a wave of anger in several parts of the country.

The gravity of the incident, which quickly led to the Army withdrawing from the Akkar region and opening an investigation, prompted leaders on both sides of the political divide to call for calm and restraint to prevent the country from sliding into sectarian strife as a result of a spillover of the 15-month-old uprising in neighboring Syria.

Sheikh Ahmad Abdul-Wahed and his companion, Sheikh Mohammad Hussein al-Mereb, were killed at an Army checkpoint in Kwaikhat while on their way to attend a rally organized by Future MP Khaled Daher in the village of Halba to commemorate the movement's victims during the 2008 clashes between pro- and anti-government supporters.

The Lebanese Army took responsibility for the incident, saying it had immediately formed a committee to investigate the deaths. The Army said in a statement that Abdul-Wahed and Mereb died of "fatal gunshot wounds in a regrettable incident near an Army checkpoint in the village of Kwaikhat."

"While expressing its deep regret over the death of the two victims and extending its heartfelt feeling of solidarity and condolences to their relatives, the Army Command points out that it immediately formed an investigation committee of senior military police officers under the supervision of the relevant judiciary," it added.

Two officers and 19 soldiers were being questioned over the incident, sources said.

Shortly after the incident, the Army pulled out its military vehicles from Akkar and returned to its barracks in the village of Qobeiyat in a move aimed at avoiding frictions with the slain preacher's supporters as gunmen were seen in the towns of Bireh, Bebnin, Halba, Aboudieh and Beruqayel.

Religious figures called for a general strike Monday to protest over the killings. The opposition Future Movement voiced its support for the strike.

Former premier Saad Hariri, leader of the Future Movement, condemned the killings and urged residents in Akkar to stay calm and avoid the trap of strife. "It is clear there is a plan to destabilize some Lebanese regions and stir up trouble in order to serve the Syrian regime and its tools," Hariri said in a statement.

“We do not blame the Lebanese Army as a whole for the killing ... But it is clear that there are some infiltrators involved in this killing who want to use the [military] establishment and its symbol to import the Syrian regime’s crisis ... to Lebanon in a desperate attempt to save it from its inevitable doom,” Hariri added.

Hariri contacted President Michel Sleiman and Lebanese Army chief Gen. Jean Kahwagi and demanded the formation of a commission to immediately probe the incident and hold those responsible, “no matter how high their rank is,” to account.

As news of the killing spread, angry residents in several Akkar villages, including Abdeh and in the northern entrance of Tripoli, took to the streets and cut off roads with burning tires, including a highway leading to Syria, while tensions ran high in most northern regions.

Also, protesters briefly cut off the Tripoli-Beirut highway, the coastal road in Naameh linking Beirut with the south, and roads in the west Beirut areas of Mazraa, Verdun, Beshara Khoury and Qasqas. The Army intervened to reopen them.

After the incident, a man identified as Khaled Mereb, who claimed to be Abdel-Wahed’s chauffeur, told local media that an Army soldier had shot the preacher after the latter attempted to drive away from the checkpoint. The chauffeur said the Army had been notified that the convoy would be crossing the checkpoint.

Upon arrival at the checkpoint, the man said several soldiers had waved them through, but one soldier demanded that the preacher step out of the car. Following a verbal altercation with the soldier, the man said he stepped out of the vehicle, when Abdul-Wahed took the driver’s seat and turned the vehicle around to go back. The soldiers then fired at the vehicle, killing the sheikh, he added.

Sleiman expressed regret over the killing, but he praised the Army’s “national role” in maintaining security throughout the country. He held a series of contacts with a number of leaders and officials following the incident, while he received contacts from leaders “stressing the significance of cooling down the situation in Akkar and avoiding a slide toward any strife or a security deterioration.”

Prime Minister Najib Mikati followed up the incident in a meeting with Defense Minister Fayeze Ghosn, Interior Minister Marwan Charbel and security chiefs.

“If some problems or mistakes occur on security duty, the laws that govern the work of these [security] agencies will be implemented,” Mikati said. “The judiciary will be the guarantor that ensures neutrality of the work of security agencies along with a political decision that is clear in this regard.”

Mikati warned against political campaigns targeting the Army and security agencies, saying such campaigns would have “negative effects because no state can rise if its security forces are targeted.”

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Mikati rejected calls for the return of the Syrian army to Tripoli to impose security in the city. “Any call for the entry of any army is definitely rejected,” he said.

Rifaat Eid, the head of the Arab Democratic Party, which controls the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood, called last week for the return of the Syrian army to Tripoli.

Mikati also rejected calls for his resignation by some Future MP. "Resignation is out of the question," he said.

Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt phoned Hariri to condemn the killing of Abdul-Wahed and his companion. He urged Akkar's residents to be vigilant to avoid falling into "the traps set by the Syrian regime." Jumblatt also called for an immediate probe into the incident to hold these responsible accountable.

Grand Mufti Sheikh Mohammad Rashid Qabbani described the killing of Abdul-Wahed as "painful, tragic, surprising and condemned." Demanding a quick probe into the incident, he announced a three-day closure of Dar al-Fatwa, the Sunni mufti's seat, and its affiliated institutions in Beirut and other areas in mourning for the slain preacher. Qabbani also called for an urgent meeting Monday of the muftis in various Lebanese areas to discuss Abdul-Wahed's killing.

Tension reached a peak following a call by Akkar MP Daher for the expulsion of the Lebanese Army and tasking the Internal Security Forces with maintaining security, as well as calls for the formation of a "free Lebanese army" along the pattern of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

Daher, who held a news conference outside his party's office in Akkar following the incident, urged the army to punish the "officers" who shot at Abdul-Wahed. He also canceled the planned rally and held Syria responsible for the incident.

He also blamed the Army Command, the government and Mikati for the killing of Abdul-Wahed "because they are not doing their jobs to protect Lebanon."

"The Army and its intelligence have always played a negative role in the region," Daher said, accusing the government of acting as "an agent" for Damascus. "We will not allow ourselves to be targeted like this," he said.

The impact of the Akkar killings could be felt in the neighboring city of Tripoli. There was an armed presence in both Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, the two rival neighborhoods that clashed last week. Sounds of gunfire could also be heard. People also gathered in Tripoli's Nour Square to protest the killings.

Tripoli and North Lebanon Mufti Sheikh Malek Shaar, after chairing a meeting at his residence with ministers, MPs and religious figures from the city, urged Sleiman, Speaker Nabih Berri, Mikati and Kahwagi to punish those responsible for Abdul-Wahed's killing. "We call on [residents] of Akkar and Tripoli ... not to block roads or burn tires and commit to public peace and give the judiciary a real opportunity to [finalize] the case," Shaar told reporters.

A prominent Salafist in Tripoli told The Daily Star that calm would return to the city. "Roads will be re-opened in the next few hours, calm will return, and authorities will be given time to conduct their probe," Bilal Dokmak said. He added that detained Islamist Shadi Mawlawi, the trigger of last week's deadly clashes in Tripoli, would be released Tuesday.