

Beirut gun battles spark fear of return to civil war

Fighting in capital after Hezbollah leader accuses government of declaring war on Shiite group

May 09, 2008
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ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT—Running gun battles raged in parts of Beirut yesterday after the leader of Hezbollah accused Lebanon's Western-backed government of declaring war on his Shiite militant group. At least 10 people were killed and 20 wounded in the capital.

In a grim reminder of Lebanon's devastating 1975-90 civil war, factions erected roadblocks and checkpoints dividing Beirut into sectarian enclaves on the second day of clashes between Sunni Muslims loyal to the government and Shiite supporters of Hezbollah.

A top Sunni leader went on television urging Hezbollah to pull its fighters back and "save Lebanon from hell." The army, which has stayed out of the sectarian political squabbling that has paralyzed the country for more than a year, did not intervene in the battles.

"There is so much shooting and explosions outside. Our building is in the middle of the fighting," a terrified woman, Ghada Helmi, told Associated Press by telephone.

Fighting began along an avenue separating Shiite and Sunni areas, then spread to other districts. Combat was heard near the office of Lebanon's Sunni spiritual leader, an ally of the government, and near the official residence of the opposition-aligned parliament speaker.

In peaceful neighbourhoods, people jammed into supermarkets rushing to stockpile food while gunmen outside peered from building entrances or took cover next to shuttered shops.

Soldiers patrolled in armoured personnel carriers trying to keep the warring factions apart. Burning car tires and vehicles, debris and dirt used to barricade streets made parts of the city look like a war zone.

The unrest virtually shut down Lebanon's international airport for a second day and barricades blocked major highways. Hezbollah first blocked roads in Beirut on Wednesday to enforce a strike called by unions, but confrontations quickly spread across the city.

Fighting intensified minutes after Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah made a televised address charging the government had declared war on his group when it decided this week to shut down Hezbollah's private telecommunications network.

He warned against trying to disarm Hezbollah and said his fighters would retaliate swiftly if attacked.

"Those who try to arrest us, we will arrest them. Those who shoot at us, we will shoot at them. The hand raised against us, we will cut it off," Nasrallah said via video link.

Later in the day, Sunni politician Rafik Hariri made a televised appeal to Nasrallah seeking to calm the conflict and "stop the slide toward civil war."

Hariri, son of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005, proposed a compromise, saying the decision on the Hezbollah communications network could be made by the army command rather than the cabinet.

The military has sought to stay out of the feuding, fearing a repeat of its break-up in the long civil war that killed 150,000 Lebanese.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar television said later that the opposition rejected Hariri's offer. Hezbollah views its private network of primitive phone lines as vital to its leaders' security.

The street fighting is the latest turn in a test of wills between the Hezbollah-led opposition and the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. The U.S.-backed government has only a slim majority in parliament, and the two sides have been locked in a 17-month power struggle that has kept government at a standstill and blocked a presidential election.

Worry intensified that the conflict could degenerate into a wider and deadlier sectarian conflict.

The fight could have implications for the entire Middle East at a time when Sunni-Shiite tensions are high. The tensions are fuelled in part by the rivalry

between predominantly Shiite Iran, which sponsors Hezbollah, and Sunni Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

With files from Reuters