

Fighting in Lebanon spreads beyond Beirut

The Associated Press
Sunday, May 11, 2008

BEIRUT: Heavy fighting broke out Sunday between pro- and anti-government forces in the central mountains overlooking the Lebanese capital, sending echoes of gunfire and explosions rolling across Beirut, security officials said.

The clashes, between pro-government supporters of the Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and Shiite gunmen and their allies, started in the mountain town of Aytat around 2 p.m. and involved exchanges of rockets and machine-gun fire, the officials said. The fighting later spread to the nearby towns of Kayfoun, Qamatiyeh, Bchamoun and Chouweifat, they said.

Intense clashes also took place in the northern city of Tripoli, where government supporters in the Tebaneh neighborhood exchanged rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine-gun fire with opposition followers in Jabal Muhsin, the officials said.

A woman was killed in the clashes, bringing the toll across the country during five days of clashes to 38. It was the worst sectarian violence since the 1975-1990 civil war.

The fighting in the north intensified in the early hours Sunday, but subsided later as Lebanese troops began deploying, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Meanwhile, west Beirut, a Muslim-majority area, has been mostly calm since Hezbollah and its allies seized control of many neighborhoods on Friday from Sunnis loyal to the government.

In the Bekaa valley in the east, sporadic clashes took place between the two groups in different towns and villages. The road leading to the main border-crossing point with Syria remained closed by supporters of the government in retaliation for the opposition's closure of the airport road.

Arab foreign ministers were to meet in Egypt on Sunday to try to find a solution to the crisis.

The clashes began last week after the government confronted Hezbollah, saying that it would dismiss the chief of airport security for what it said were ties to Hezbollah, and declared the group's private telephone network an illegal threat to state security.

Prime Minister Fouad Siniora made a key concession to the Hezbollah-led opposition in a speech on Saturday, however, and the army, widely seen as a neutral force in Lebanon, afterward called for Hezbollah gunmen to withdraw from the streets of Beirut and reopen blocked roads.

Most Hezbollah fighters complied, leaving just a handful of its armed allies on the streets.

The army offered Hezbollah a compromise, saying the airport security chief would retain his post and recommending that the government reverse the decision on the phone network.

That proposal - quickly embraced by both government leaders and the opposition - sharply underscored the Lebanese Army's role as the one national institution seen as neutral here. Many have feared that the army would fragment along sectarian or political lines, as it did during the 15-year civil war.

Instead, it has come through the latest conflict unscathed. But the army's neutrality has come at a price: In this crisis, as in others, the army stood by, unwilling to be seen as taking sides, even when street battles were taking place.

Still, the army's proposal is likely to enhance the political prospects of its leader, General Michel Suleiman, who appears to be the only man both camps are willing to accept as Lebanon's next president.

The presidency has been vacant since November, amid a political stalemate.