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Syrian opposition warns Hezbollah to stay out



The Syrian opposition called on Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters from the country immediately, as activists said regime troops supported by pro-government gunmen linked to the Lebanese Shiite militant group battled rebels Sunday for control of a string of villages near the Lebanon-Syria border. The Syrian National Coalition - the main Western-backed opposition group - warned that Hezbollah involvement in Syria's civil war could lead to greater risks in the area, and urged the Lebanese government to "adopt the necessary measures to stop the aggression of Hezbollah" and to control the border to "prevent further risks and to protect civilians in the area." The statement, posted on the Coalition's Facebook page, coincides with a surge in fighting around the contested town of Qusair in Syria's Homs province near the frontier with Lebanon. Over the past two weeks, the Syrian military, supported by pro-regime militia backed by Hezbollah, has pushed to regain control of the border area - a strategic region because it links Damascus with the Mediterranean coastal enclave that is the heartland of President Bashar Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. It also points to the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, which pits a government dominated by the president's Alawite minority against a primarily Sunni Muslim rebellion, as well as fears that the civil war could drag in neighboring states. The pro-regime gunmen are members of the Popular Committees, which were set up last year in Syria with Hezbollah's backing to protect Syrian villages inhabited by Lebanese Shiites, although rebels accuse the fighters of attacking opposition villages in the area and fighting alongside government forces. While Hezbollah confirms backing the Popular Committees, it denies taking part in Syria's civil war. The fighting along the border region has flared in recent weeks, and on Saturday government forces captured the villages of Radwaniyeh and Tel al-Nabi Mando. On Sunday, regime forces shelled the villages of Abu Hourri, Saqarigh, Nahriyeh and Ein al-Tanour in the Qusair region, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights activist group. It said at least four rebels were killed in the fighting. Syrian state television said the army was trying to "uproot all the terrorists from the area." The government, which denies it is facing a popular uprising, describes the revolt as a foreign-backed plot and calls those trying to topple it "terrorists." Lebanon's state-run news agency reported two shells fired from Syria landed Sunday in the town of Hermel near the frontier with Syria, causing material damage but no casualties. A day earlier, two mortar rounds landed in the town for the first time, marking an escalation in violence along the already tense border. Syria's two-year-old conflict has repeatedly spilled over into neighboring states, while the violence at home has forced more than 1 million Syrians to escape their homeland to seek safety abroad. Most of the refugees have fled to Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, where they have put an immense burden on already cash-strapped governments to cope with huge influx.