

Tuesday, 23 April 2013

Two Syrian rockets hit Lebanon as tensions rise



The Associated Press, Beirut

Two Syrian rockets struck Lebanon on Tuesday, causing damage and heightening tensions between Lebanese Shiite and Sunni communities over neighboring Syria's civil war, security officials in Beirut said.

Rockets apparently fired by Syrian rebels have hit mostly Shiite areas in Lebanon several times in the past two weeks. One salvo killed at least two people.

Tuesday's rocket attack came hours after two leading Lebanese Sunni Muslim clerics called for holy war, or jihad, in Syria. They appealed to fighters to protect Sunnis in villages under attack by Syrian troops and pro-government Shiite gunmen.

Lebanon and Syria share a complex web of political and sectarian ties and rivalries that are easily enflamed. Lebanon, a country plagued by decades of strife, has been on edge since the uprising against President Bashar Assad erupted in March 2011.

Pro- and anti-Assad groups in Lebanon have engaged in deadly clashes. Many Lebanese Shiites back Assad, whose regime is dominated by members his minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam. Lebanese Sunnis back the rebels, who are mostly from that country's Sunni majority.

Syrian rebels accuse Hezbollah of fighting alongside Assad's troops and attacking rebels from inside Lebanese territory. Though Hezbollah confirms backing the regime's fighters, it denies taking part in the wider civil war.

The Qusayr region around the Orontes River is strategic because it links the capital Damascus with the Mediterranean coastal enclave that is the heartland of Assad's Alawite sect.

In Lebanon, hard-line Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, one of the militant group Hezbollah's harshest critics, issued a religious edict urging Sunni Lebanese men "to defend Qusayr." Assir is based in the southern port city of Sidon

Another Sunni cleric, Sheikh Salem al-Rafie, who is based in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, issued another edict calling for a "general mobilization among Sunnis to protect Sunni brothers." He said the people of Qusayr appealed for "money and men."

Assir and Rafie said Hezbollah has violated the Lebanese government's neutral stance toward Syria's civil war by taking part in the fighting.