

Tuesday, 18 June 2013

At least 2 killed in clashes in South Lebanon



Heavy clashes erupted Tuesday between unknown gunmen and followers of a radical Sunni cleric in south Lebanon, security officials said, killing two people in the latest apparent outbreak of violence between Lebanese factions supporting opposing sides in the civil war in neighboring Syria. Automatic rifles and rocket propelled grenades were used in the fighting in an eastern suburb of the port city of Sidon, marking the worst violence in the area in years. In Syria on Tuesday, activists reported clashes between Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces and rebels in the country's largest city of Aleppo and its surroundings, while warplanes bombed rebel positions outside an embattled air base. An unexplained explosion in a rebel-held village killed 20 people, they said. Lebanon has been on the edge for months. The country is deeply divided along sectarian lines, with Sunni Muslims largely supporting their brethren in Syria, who make up the majority of the rebellion against President Bashar Assad's regime, and many Shiites supporting Assad, whose regime is dominated by Alawites, an offshoot sect of Shiite Islam. The polarization has deepened in recent weeks after Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah group openly joined the fight in Syria on the side of Assad, helping his troops crush rebels in a town just over the border in Syria earlier this month. The hardline Sunni cleric whose followers were fighting in Sidon, Sheik Ahmad al-Assir, is a vehement critic of the Hezbollah and has threatened to clear apartments occupied by the group's supporters in the mostly Sunni city. Officials believed the gunmen fighting al-Assir's followers to be Hezbollah sympathizers. Tensions have been building in Sidon since Monday, when followers of al-Assir said a soldier verbally harassed one of them as he went to a local mosque to pray. The clashes erupted Tuesday after several people attacked the car of Amjad al-Assir, the brother of the hardline cleric, throwing stones at his car and breaking its glass, the officials said. A statement from al-Assir's office said he was not driving it at the time. Lebanese army troops deployed in the area of the fighting, the officials said. They spoke anonymously in line with regulations. Earlier Tuesday, Lebanon's official news agency said unknown gunmen shot and wounded a Syrian man, whom it said was believed to have been involved in a deadly attack on four Shiite youth in Ras Baalbek, a Hezbollah stronghold located in a volatile area near the border with Syria. The National News Agency did not elaborate on the suspected connection between the attack on the Syrian in the town of Labwa and the killing of four Shiites in a Sunday ambush nearby. The Syrian uprising began more than two years ago with peaceful protests against Assad, but later grew into a civil war that has killed 93,000 people and probably many more, according to the U.N. Millions of Syrian fled their homes and sought shelter in neighboring countries with Jordan and Lebanon hosting the bulk of them, further fueling fears that Syrian conflict's sporadic spill overs across the border into the Arab country of four million people will turn into a full blown war. Lebanon is still recovering from its own 15-year civil war that ended in 1990. In Syria meanwhile, an explosion inside a housing complex in a rebel-held village in the country's northern Idlib province killed 20 people, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. It was not immediately known what caused the explosion and who was behind it. Nobody claimed responsibility for the blast. The complex belonged to a member of parliament, the group said. The lawmaker, Ahmed al-Mubarak, was not in the area at the time of the explosion but his brother was among those killed, the Observatory's director Rami Abdul-Rahman said. In Aleppo province north of Idlib, warplanes also struck rebel positions near the Kweiras military air base, activists said, but there was no word on casualties. Rebels have been trying for months to take Kweiras and two other military air bases nearby without success. Assad's regime has relied heavily in the past year on its air force to neutralize the opposition's territorial gains. In the last year, rebels have been able to capture much of the area near the Turkish border, several districts in Aleppo, the whole city of Raqqa and even dams on the River Euphrates. But