

Kidnap of Lebanese pilgrims in Syria heightens tensions



Shia Muslim youths set tires on fire to block the Mar Mikhael road at the entrance of Beirut's southern suburbs in protest against the kidnapping of 13 Lebanese Shia pilgrims in Syria. (AFP/Anwar Amro)

The Syrian conflict took a broader turn in the region on Tuesday after Syrian rebels reportedly kidnapped 13 Lebanese Shia Muslims as they were headed home by bus from a pilgrimage in Iran.

Lebanon's state news agency said the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is fighting to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad, had abducted 13 pilgrims in northern Aleppo province.

Syrian media put the number of abductees at 12.

However, a spokesperson from the Free Syrian Army denied the accusation.

"We have nothing to do with the abduction of the Lebanese [men] in Aleppo," Khaled Youssef Hammoud told Future News television, adding that the Syrian regime was "responsible for the kidnapping."

Reports of the kidnappings prompted families of those abducted, along with thousands of supporters, to gather in Beirut's mainly Shia southern suburbs to demand their release.

Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah urged restraint on Tuesday after the group of Lebanese Shia Muslims were reportedly kidnapped in Syria.

Nasrallah, a strong ally of the embattled regime in Damascus, appealed for calm and said his Shia militant party was doing its utmost to ensure the safe release of the men.

"I call on everyone to show restraint," Nasrallah said in a televised speech. "It is not acceptable for anyone to block roads or carry out violent acts."

Nasrallah said contacts were underway with Syrian authorities and other countries in the region for a quick resolution.

"We will work day and night until those beloved are back with us," he vowed.

Nasrallah said Hezbollah was also in contact with Prime Minister Najib Mikati, whose government is dominated by the powerful militant group.

"The Lebanese state and government have a responsibility to work toward the release of those kidnapped," he said.

Nasrallah urged his followers not to carry out revenge attacks against Syrians in Lebanon.

Syrian state media said the kidnapping took place near the town of Aazaz, which sits along the border with Turkey. It said the men were part of a group of 53 pilgrims on board two buses. The women were allowed to go free.

Activists in Aleppo reached by AFP via Skype said Aazaz was undergoing fierce shelling Tuesday evening by regime forces who stormed the town.

The brother of one of those kidnapped said the FSA had vowed to release the men in exchange for rebels detained by Syrian authorities.

"Prime Minister Mikati has urged families of the kidnapped to remain calm and assured them he was following the issue closely to ensure the safety of those abducted and their quick release," a statement said.

The kidnapping took place amid heightened tension in Lebanon over the Syrian crisis.

Clashes between the pro- and anti-Assad camps in the country have left some 12 people dead in the past 10 days.

Nasrallah said it was necessary for all Lebanese to remain calm.

"The atmosphere is tense because of the events of recent days," he said. "Everyone is urged not to make matters worse."

Ex-Premier Saad Hariri, who heads the anti-Assad opposition in Lebanon, denounced the kidnapping and called for the men's immediate release.

"We condemn the kidnapping of our Lebanese brothers in Syria, regardless of the party behind the kidnapping, and we call for their immediate release," he said in a statement.

Separately, protesters blocked roads in the northern Akkar region for a third day, a security official said, amid mounting tension.

The protests were linked to the weekend killings of two clerics at an army checkpoint in Akkar, a mainly Sunni region whose inhabitants are hostile to Assad.

The killings ignited street battles in the capital Beirut on Monday that left two people dead and 18 wounded.

Amnesty International, meanwhile, called on the Lebanese authorities to launch an independent investigation into the killing of the two Sunni clerics.

A Lebanese judicial official said 21 soldiers, including three officers, were being questioned by military police in relation to the clerics' deaths.

In related developments, a Lebanese military judge ordered the release on bail of an Islamist whose arrest had been another source of friction between pro- and anti-Assad, a judicial official said.

Shadi al-Mawlawi's May 12 arrest on charges of belonging to a terrorist organization sparked sectarian clashes in the northern port city of Tripoli that killed 10 people.

His supporters say he was targeted because he was helping Syrian refugees fleeing the unrest in their country, as

the unrest in Lebanon highlighted deep divisions over Syria.

Lebanon was dominated by its larger neighbor for decades and the sectarian politics of the two countries have remained a source of tension.

-AFP/NOW Lebanon