
2 killed over Lebanese Christian rivals clash

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Lebanese security officials reported that a gunfight between rival Christian political groups in northern Lebanon has left two people dead and three wounded

The clash between the anti-Syrian Lebanese Forces group and the pro-Syrian Marada group was triggered by a disagreement over hanging banners.

On Tuesday, leaders of 14 of Lebanon's rival factions started talks aimed at solving deep divisions in the country.

The army has now set up checkpoints around Bsarma where the clash occurred.

Violent incidents across Lebanon in recent days have raised fears of a return to sectarian violence that left at least 65 people dead in May, correspondents say.

One supporter from each of the Lebanese Forces (LF) group and Marada were killed, reports say, while the injured were a policeman and two LF members.

Marada, led by the pro-Syrian leader Suleiman Franjeh, is allied to the Shia-led Hezbollah. LF is led by former rightwing warlord Samir Geagea, who belongs to the Western-backed alliance led by Sunni politician Saad Hariri.

LF supporters had been hanging banners in Bsarma village in preparation for their annual Martyrs Mass ceremony on Sunday.

Security officials said a banner had been pulled down and the shooting started after Lebanese Forces members returned to display it again.

Leaders at Tuesday's inaugural National Dialogue conference agreed to work towards a national defence strategy for Lebanon, one of the most divisive issues being the fate of Hezbollah's weapons.

A statement after the three-hour meeting chaired by President Michel Suleiman said the next session would be on 5 November. In the meantime, Mr Suleiman will mediate bilateral talks between the rival groups.

The Doha agreement in May which ended the most serious inter-factional fighting, but violence has persisted between sectarian groups in Tripoli and the Bekaa valley, mainly between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and pro-Syrian Alawites.

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