

Fatah Islam leader slams Lebanon's army chief in new audio message

Contributed by AP, Reuters
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By The Associated Press

The fugitive leader of the al-Qaida-inspired militant Fatah Islam group lashed out at the head of Lebanon's army, accusing him of destroying a Palestinian refugee camp as part of deal to become the country's next president, according to an audio tape posted on a militant Web site Monday.

Shaker Youssef al-Absi also warned Gen. Michel Suleiman's followers that they his fighters would hunt them down.

The 57-minute tape was the first purported message from the Fatah Islam leader since fighting first broke out between the militant group and the Lebanese military at the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon in May. The battle at the camp ended in early September, and he remains at large.

In the audiotape, titled Warning and Escape, al-Absi criticized Lebanon's Suleiman, who led the fight against Fatah Islam and has most recently emerged as a consensus candidate for president.

"Nahr el-Bared is completely devastated and its people have become homeless and Michel Suleiman sits on their skulls from the presidency chair," al-Absi said.

He accused Suleiman of only waging a battle against Fatah Islam in the camp for political purposes, including appeasing the United States.

"America's intervention forced a deal. They told the commander, 'If you want the presidency, then you must present the head of Nahr el-Bared,'" he said, meaning Suleiman was pressured to destroy the camp.

He also threatened Suleiman's followers and called soldiers who fought under him infidels.

"I swear to Allah we will not leave you in peace, and we will hunt you down," he said.

The more than three-month siege at Nahr el-Bared destroyed large parts of the camp. The government has said about 220 militants and 168 Lebanese soldiers were killed, while Palestinian officials have said 47 Palestinian civilians died.

The tape could not immediately be independently verified, but it appeared on a Web site commonly used by Islamic militants. In the tape, al-Absi did not indicate where he was located. Authorities have said he had fled Nahr el-Bared hours before the army took over.

"This is the first word after the heroic battle in Nahr el-Bared camp," al-Absi said.

Fatah Islam had set up base in Nahr el-Bared in late 2006. Authorities say the group is made up of Muslim militants of various nationalities, and Al-Absi is a Palestinian linked to the late leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He was sentenced to death in absentia in Jordan for his involvement in the 2002 murder of U.S. diplomat Laurence Foley in Amman.

Rival lawmakers in Lebanon have agreed to back Suleiman as a compromise candidate for Lebanon's presidency, but his election has been delayed. The parliament must first amend the constitution to allow a sitting military chief to become president, but the process has been complicated by the opposition's demand for a new unity government that would give it veto power.

The politically divided country has been without a president since former President Emile Lahoud's term ended Nov. 23.

Militant Leader Releases 1st Web Message
January 7th, 2008 @ 5:11pm
By OMAR SINAN
Associated Press Writer

CAIRO, Egypt (AP) - The fugitive leader of an al-Qaida-inspired group lashed out at the head of Lebanon's army, accusing him of destroying a Palestinian refugee camp as part of deal to become the country's next president, according to an audio tape posted on a militant Web site Monday.

The 57-minute tape was the first purported message from the Fatah Islam leader since fighting broke out between the militant group and the Lebanese military at the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon in May. The battle at the camp ended in early September, and he remains at large.

Shaker Youssef al-Absi also said in the 57-minute tape that his fighters would hunt down the followers of Gen. Michel Suleiman, who led the fight against Fatah Islam and has most recently emerged as a consensus candidate for president.

He accused Suleiman of only waging the battle at the camp for political purposes, including appeasing the United States.

"America's intervention forced a deal. They told the commander, 'If you want the presidency, then you must present the head of Nahr el-Bared,'" he said, meaning Suleiman was pressured to destroy the camp.

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Fatah al-Islam chief warns of attacks on Lebanon army
Mon Jan 7, 2008 5:50pm EST
By Inal Ersan

DUBAI (Reuters) - The leader of the Fatah al-Islam group threatened attacks against the Lebanese army after it crushed its militants in battles at a refugee camp in northern Lebanon last year.

"Nahr al-Bared camp will stand witness to your shame until the mujahideen tread your (bodies) with their shoes," a speaker identified as Shaker al-Abssi said in a 58-minute audio recording posted on a Web site used by al Qaeda and other Islamist groups on Monday.

"This was only the beginning ... By God you will not live safely," he said. "The mill of war has started to grind ... between the infidels and the believers."

If authenticated, the recording would be the first public evidence that Abssi survived the 15-week battle in which more than 400 people were killed.

"This is my first speech after the epic of Nahr al-Bared," said the militant who praised al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden as the "Sheikh (leader) of Mujahideen". He said there were 140 fighters in the camp.

He said he wished he had died alongside his fellow fighters in the Nahr al-Bared camp and accused the Lebanese army of using banned weapons in the battle that destroyed most of it.

At the time a Fatah al-Islam prisoner identified a body as Abssi's as did his wife and family members. The Lebanese army ran DNA tests after taking blood from his relatives.

The Lebanese public prosecutor has said DNA tests proved that Abssi, a Palestinian, was not among the fighters killed by Lebanese troops. Lebanese troops seized control of the camp on September 2.

"I think victory, as far as you are concerned, is to please (U.S. President George W.) Bush and the Jews, is he not the god you worship?" said the militant in a message addressed to what he described as the "crusader army" of Lebanon.

He said Washington had promised army chief Michel Suleiman -- now the compromise candidate for the Lebanese presidency -- to become the head of state if he was able to win the battle.

"America ... told the leader of the crusader army: 'if you want the chair of presidency then you have to bring down the head of Nahr al-Bared'," he said.

The militant vowed in the undated recording to seek the release of the group's prisoners and urged Muslims to help the group's militants.

Abssi was sentenced to death in absentia for the killing of a U.S. diplomat in Jordan in 2002. He was later jailed in Syria before setting up Fatah al-Islam in north Lebanon last year.

(Reporting by Inal Ersan; editing by Elizabeth Piper)

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