

Lebanon's largest Palestinian camp a powder keg waiting to blow

Contributed by Administrator
Saturday, 07 July 2007
Last Updated Saturday, 07 July 2007

EIN EL-HILWEH CAMP, Lebanon---- Bearded gunmen disappear into narrow alleys, eyed by rival fighters. Clouds of black smoke drift through the streets from shelled buildings and smoldering tires. And mothers hurriedly pack their children's clothes into plastic bags, ready to flee.

This camp of 65,000 Palestinian refugees is on a knife edge, fearing that the fighting at another northern Lebanese camp between the army and militants could spread here in a sustained way -- or worse, that armed factions could erupt into intra-Palestinian hostilities.

On Tuesday, troops pounded Islamic militants hiding in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon on the fifth straight day of the military's sustained assault to crush the Fatah Islam fighters.

The fighting had spread Sunday evening and Monday to the Ein el-Hilweh camp in the south. Ein el-Hilweh was calm on Tuesday, but many think it is inevitable the violence will resume.

"It's a time bomb that explodes intermittently," said Abu Motie, a member of the mainstream Palestinian Fatah group in Ein el-Hilweh.

Late Sunday and Monday, Islamic militants from a group called Jund al-Sham, who support the extremist Fatah Islam fighters in the northern camp, fired rocket-propelled grenades at the Lebanese army on the edge of Ein el-Hilweh, prompting the army to return fire.

Residents caught in the middle fear the worst. Many are packing a few belongings into plastic bags and fleeing.

"We're not prepared to die because of a few thugs," said an angry Wafa Amour as she and her two sisters and their children hurried out of the camp.

Palestinian officials say up to 8,000 Palestinians have fled the camp since Sunday.

Ein el-Hilweh, the largest of 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, is a microcosm of the complexities of intra-Palestinian rivalries and social and economic miseries.

Its maze of cinderblock buildings -- notorious for lawlessness and for neighborhoods run by factions who often fight for control -- also has become a haven for criminal fugitives, including Lebanese.

Much of the rivalry among major Palestinian political groups in Gaza and the West Bank is also played out here.

But what has caught the world's attention is the assortment of smaller, fanatic Islamic groups now present in the camps, who espouse everything from fighting Israel to challenging U.S. influence in the region by sending fighters to Iraq.

Tensions had been growing, punctuated by occasional violence, for months in Ein el-Hilweh, even before the explosion of violence between militants and the country's army in Nahr el-Bared camp to the north.

An official with the secular Fatah faction said his group is being prevented by other Palestinian Islamic factions in the camp from eliminating Jund al-Sham gunmen, whose number is reportedly only in the dozens.

"They're worried if we take matters into our hands, our faction will gain the upper hand in the whole camp," said Col. Abu Walid Ashi, a Fatah spokesman in Ein el-Hilweh.

"If they let us, we can finish them off in hours. They are giving them political cover," he said.

A senior member of Asbat al-Ansar, a radical Islamic group with close ties to Jund al-Sham, confirmed that intra-Palestinian rivalries were to blame for a stalemate among the various groups.

Fatah militiamen on Monday spread out on the main street on the northern end of the camp. Bearded gunmen -- some with their pistols tucked in their belts -- walked in the nearby side streets. It was not clear who they were, but they did not

belong to Fatah.

"They're all mercenaries," said Salem Abu Ghneim, 55, with Fatah, pointing to a street where the bearded gunmen stood.

"There's some kind of plot in the camp," said 18-year-old Wahib Ahmed, standing nearby. "All we want is security."

"But that's forbidden for Palestinians," interjected his friend, Bilal Suleiman, 20.

The group of men all said they were unemployed. Asked what might happen in the camp in future, they bemoaned both the security situation and their own future prospects.

Palestinian refugees have few rights under Lebanese law. They are barred from taking most professional jobs and cannot buy or rent property outside the camps.

"I'm a condemned Palestinian," said Mohammed Ghotani, 24.

June 5, 2007

BY SCHEHEREZADE FARAMARZI Associated Press