

At least six killed in Lebanese fuel protests

Harvey Thompson
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Six people are reported to have been shot dead and dozens hurt in Lebanon's capital Beirut, May 27, as soldiers tried to disperse protests against rising fuel costs. The protesters were demanding a reduction of petrol prices from about \$17 to \$10 for 20 litres. The rising cost of living has also created widespread discontent amongst the poor, observers say.

Security officials said soldiers fired warning shots to disperse about 600 protesters in the poor suburb of Hay al-Sellom, but some people were hit. The names of the dead are: Khodr Shreif, Hussam Yaghi, Ali Kharfan, Ali Amhaz, Abbas Kharoubi and a woman whose name was not disclosed. Medical sources said that two of the wounded were in critical condition.

At least 40 people were injured in the clashes, during which protesters reportedly tried to seize an army truck. Witnesses said protesters threw stones, glass and pieces of wood at soldiers in Hay al-Sellom, while drivers blocked the main Beirut-Damascus highway with burning tyres for a short time. Some protesters waved loaves of bread and carried placards depicting donkeys they would need to replace their cars if fuel prices continued to increase.

In a telephone interview with the *Daily Star*, MP Hussein Hajj Hassan said, "Instead of calming the situation, the army shot at people for no reason ... We are trying to calm the situation on both sides and I believe that we have almost succeeded. But the protesters are extremely angry. Some of their friends are dead and they are furious."

One soldier beat an AFP photographer with the butt of his assault rifle, while others attacked a protester lying on the ground. At least two demonstrators were loaded aboard a military truck and three soldiers and five civilians were seen evacuated with injuries.

An army statement later said five servicemen, including one officer, were wounded by the stones. It said that the army intervened to clear roads blocked by

the protesters and opened fire after demonstrators attempted to seize military vehicles. Two military vehicles were also reportedly damaged.

Protesters also burned tyres to block the highway leading to Beirut International Airport and two other nearby roads linking the capital with the south, prompting the army to deploy and fire shots into the air.

Following these clashes, demonstrators stormed a Labour Ministry building and set it on fire. Around 300 army troops armed with batons entered the Labour Ministry in the evening, expelling protesters and containing the fire that had already destroyed an entire floor.

Correspondents say it was the worst day of public unrest in Lebanon for a decade. Hay al-Sellom is a stronghold of the Shia Muslim guerrilla movement and political party Hezbollah. Unarmed civilian Hezbollah members deployed in the area, but did not mingle with the demonstrators, according to AFP correspondents.

The demonstrations occurred as schools, businesses and public transport shut down in response to a strike call by labour unions. The strike was the latest in a series of protests in recent months over the Lebanese economy. Widespread anger at petrol prices bolstered support for the May 27 strike, with an estimated half a million people across the country involved.

Outside the cabinet headquarters, dozens of protesters held a sit-in, carrying banners denouncing the high gasoline prices, corruption, fiscal policies and unemployment. "The government is forcing us to go back to a no-oil era," read one placard.

In the southern Mediterranean port of Tyre, about 100 cabbies blocked access to the city for about an hour before giving in to orders by security forces to reopen the roadway. About 40 unions answered the strike call, crippling private and public schools, public transportation, and many businesses and industries across the country.

Drivers unions have vowed to escalate protests and threatened to resort to cheaper fuel—such as banned diesel—from July 1.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri has urged Justice Minister Bahij Tabbarah and the public prosecutor's office to take action against petrol stations for failing to comply with last week's cabinet decision to lower prices.

Petrol prices are currently around \$0.80 a litre, while the government has demanded a charge of \$0.74. Following the protests, the CGTL (union federation) issued a statement calling on "workers, drivers and all those taking part in the general strike to end their demonstrations and maintain the civilised and peaceful aspect of their protest." The CGTL had called for sit-ins in major cities to protest government fiscal policies and petrol prices, which they want reduced to \$10 (5.3 gallons) for 20 litres, down from \$17.

The Lebanese industrialists' association decided to halt commercial activities for the day, without stopping production. Industrialists have been denouncing the high cost of production, including power fees. Trade associations, the public administration and banks decided to remain open.

There are serious problems with the Lebanese economy, with a public debt of \$34 billion, or 185 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Debt servicing currently accounts for 47 percent of state revenues. The private sector has been badly hit with thousands of job losses since last year.

Widespread riots during a general strike in 1992 led to the resignation of Prime Minister Omar Karamah, bringing Hariri to power. Hariri was forced to cut short his trip to Syria after a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad, whose country is the main power broker in Lebanon.

The oil producers' cartel OPEC is under intense international pressure to boost output and thereby lower high oil prices that have hit economies worldwide.

In a related development up to 1,500 people marched to Abdel-Hamid Karami Square in Libya's capital Tripoli, last week, where they were confronted by hundreds of members of the Internal Security Forces.

Jamal Chehab from the General Labour Confederation (GLC) in Tripoli, delivered a speech calling on the government to heed "the plight of members of the public and stop weighing them down

with taxes."

Demonstrators gathered around a donkey brought on the march. The animal bore the slogan: "No inspection or gasoline needed." A GLC official called on the government not to raise "the price of oats, so donkeys would not starve."

A source within the GLC said the organisation had no plans to expand the strike because they did not want to jeopardise upcoming municipal elections.

In Sidon, people waved loaves of bread calling for "honourable lives."

"I have mortgaged my taxi driver's license with the gas station to fill my car with gasoline," said driver Ahmed Sabbagh. He was one of hundreds of taxi drivers who gathered in Sidon's Nejme Square to protest high gasoline prices.

As Internal Security Forces took defensive positions throughout the city, one cabbie shouted that drivers and ordinary members of the public were starving and dying, but the government "pretends not to see."



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