

LEBANON PLEADS FOR END TO THE VIOLENCE

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Candlelit vigils in protest at the recent spate of bombings won't stop the attacks, writes Rania Abouzeid in Beirut

THE dozens of candles were arranged in Beirut's Martyr's Square to spell out "kafa!" or "enough!", their glow reflected in the faces of the hundreds gathered solemnly around them to denounce a recent wave of bombings, including one last week that maimed a prominent anti-Syrian journalist.

May Chidiac, a well-known television news anchorwoman in her 40s, lost her left arm and leg after a bomb exploded in her car.

It was the 13th bombing since a massive seaside explosion killed powerhouse prime minister Rafik Hariri and 20 others in February, sparking street rallies that toppled the Syrian-backed government and forced Damascus to withdraw its troops in April, ending its 29-year domination.

In the months before his death, the billionaire five-time prime minister had quietly stepped up his opposition to Syrian tampering in Lebanese affairs.

Hariri's slaying prompted a UN inquiry headed by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, who is due to report his findings to the Security Council this month.

The wave of bombings has largely targeted opponents of Syria, and residential and commercial centres in Christian suburbs where anti-Syrian sentiment is high.

Numerous Lebanese politicians, including Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, have warned of more attacks and linked the Hariri investigation with the continuing violence.

"The terrorist operations aren't over yet," Siniora said a few days after the Chidiac attack. "We are still awaiting the Mehlis report and as time goes by we'll see that those people who stand to lose from the report will increase their attacks.

"This is not just one battle; it's a war against terrorism."

Less than a week after the attempt on Chidiac's life, security forces foiled an attempt to plant explosives in a Christian judge's car north of Beirut.

The Internal Security Forces said at the weekend that judge Nazim Khoury had seen suspicious activity by two men near his car and raised the alarm. The men fled before the police arrived but left wires and batteries behind, although no explosives were found.

The judge has been investigating possible money-laundering at Banque al-Madina, which is being liquidated by the central bank because of financial difficulties. Former Syrian security officials in Lebanon are believed to have been involved in the scandal.

The shaky security situation has prompted several prominent anti-Syrian figures, including Saad Hariri, son of the slain prime minister and leader of the largest bloc in parliament, to seek safety overseas.

Others, such as Walid Jumblatt, an outspoken Druze leader and Hariri ally, remain holed up in their homes in heavily guarded seclusion.

Interior Minister Hassan Sabaa acknowledged last week that the Government had no leads and was struggling against an enemy he described as "some kind of phantom".

Although the perpetrators of all the bombings, including Hariri's assassination, remain at large, the Mehlis investigation has netted

four much-feared, pro-Syrian security chiefs who have been in custody for a month, charged with helping orchestrate the murder of Hariri.

But political bickering has hindered the appointment of new security chiefs, creating a leadership vacuum at the top while concerns remain that the old Syrian-backed security system has not been routed out at its lower levels.

"Do you think that when we speak of the joint Lebanese-Syrian security regime that it was contained to four people?" Sabaa said. "It was a vast network that also included everyone from bank managers to journalists."

Many Lebanese blame Damascus and its local allies for all the attacks, but the arrests of the four security linchpins have marked the first tangible links between, at the very least, Hariri's killing and Syria's friends in Lebanon.

Dramatic allegations by Deputy Prime Minister Elias Murr last week that Syria's former intelligence chief in Lebanon, Rustom Ghazaleh, threatened him months before an attempt on his life in a July car bombing have also fuelled such speculation.

The Australian reported in July that Murr, a nominal pro-Syrian, might have been targeted because of damning information he possessed about the Syrian-controlled security services and their possible role in Hariri's killing. Murr, also Defence Minister, is the son-in-law of Damascus's handpicked leader in Lebanon, President Emile Lahoud.

He told the LBC television station he had finally decided to speak out because he had "had enough" after the attack on Chidiac, an LBC news anchor and political talk-show host. He said he had a heated quarrel with Ghazaleh in a telephone conversation last year and told the Syrian intelligence chief he had no right to call and scold a senior Lebanese security official about an internal Lebanese matter.

"I later got wind about threats against me personally," Murr said in a telephone interview from Switzerland, where he is recovering from injuries sustained in the car bomb.

"In January 2005 I left Lebanon because the security services were not interested in protecting me, and stayed away until I was appointed in Premier Najib Mikati's Government (in April)."

The official Syrian news agency SANA quoted an unidentified Syrian Information Ministry official as denying Murr's allegations. Lahoud has also rejected his son-in-law's testimony.

Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh, who survived a car bombing last October, said on Friday that Ghazaleh had told senior Lebanese security agents not to investigate his attack.

"He told them I had probably staged the bombing to give myself importance," Hamadeh, who has undergone nine operations as a result of the bombing, told Future TV. "I urge these Lebanese security officials to come forward and publicly reveal what they know about who is really behind all of these terrorist acts."

The Government has requested the help of FBI agents to investigate the Chidiac attack and asked 11 countries and the UN to train Lebanese security forces in an attempt to combat the lawlessness.

But the measures are cold comfort to many of the people who have poured back into Martyr's Square, scene of this spring's massive anti-Syrian rallies, to participate in candlelit vigils such as that on Thursday and demand that the Government take concrete action against the wave of bombings.

"We need soldiers on the street; we need more checkpoints," said Hani Chartouni, a 26-year-old bank employee. "The FBI isn't going to protect us."

Many of those gathered carried pictures of the victims of recent assassination attempts, creating a mosaic of faces interrupted by the occasional cedar-emblazoned Lebanese flag.

Some just sat around the candles in quiet contemplation.

"It's like déjà vu," said Miriam Obeid, a 47-year-old mother of three who clutched a picture of Chidiac as she knelt to place a candle near the Martyr's Monument in the centre of the square.

"Someone is killed, we come to the square, we yell, we cry and then we wonder who is next. Enough is enough. How many more people have to die?"