



Norway bow-and-arrow attack an 'act of terror'

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## Death threats, law suits: COVID experts targeted



BEIRUT: A Shiite fighter reloads during clashes in the area of Tayouneh, in the southern suburb of the capital Beirut yesterday. — AFP

# Lebanese protest turns violent

## Exchanges of fire turn Beirut into a war zone; 6 killed

**BEIRUT:** Tank deployments and deadly exchanges of fire turned Beirut into a war zone yesterday after a demonstration organized by Shiite parties against the lead investigator into last year's devastating port blast turned violent. Heavy fire rang out as ambulances rushed the wounded through the deserted streets, a few blocks from the Palace of Justice, where hundreds of black-clad protesters had gathered moments earlier to demand Tarek Bitar's removal.

The judge has in recent days been in the sights of the Hezbollah and Amal parties in particular for insisting on subpoenaing top officials in his probe into last year's deadly explosion in Beirut port. According to Interior Minister Bas-sam Mawlawi, at least six people were killed, all of them by gunfire. They included a 24-year-old who was hit in the head by a stray bullet while inside her home, a doctor at the Sahel hospital in Beirut's southern suburbs told AFP.

The Lebanese Red Cross put the number of wounded at 30. AFP correspondents heard several loud bangs in the area, likely from heavy shelling, and saw plumes of black smoke rising from an apparent fire. A limp body lying

on a main street was carried away by rescuers as gunfire rained around them, the correspondents said.

Residents covered in corridors away from windows, as some were shattered by the gunfire. Some scurried outside, running towards ambulances as civil defense volunteers tried to evacuate civilians, including young children. Pictures circulating on social media showed children in a nearby school ducking under desks and gathering on the floor outside classrooms. "I'm with my cousin and my aunt, and we're hiding in a two-square-metre space between rooms because we are afraid of stray bullets," said Bissan al-Fakih, who lives a few hundred metres (yards) away from the clashes.

"We're wondering if we could leave, but we're not sure if there is a way out". Another resident said he took shelter in a corridor for two hours before he managed to find a taxi to get him out. "I can't handle these loud sounds, especially the RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), it's the trauma of the Beirut blast coming back all over again," said the resident, who gave his name only as Samer.

### 'Bursts of gunfire'

The army reported "bursts of gunfire in the area of Tayouneh - Badaro," a largely residential area of the capital. "The army rushed to cordon off the area and deploy in its neighborhoods and their entrance. Patrols started as did the search for the shooters to detain them," it said. In a follow-up statement, the army warned it would open fire at anyone firing live rounds, calling on civilians to evacuate the area.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati called for calm to be restored and warned against attempts to drag Lebanon into violence. In a statement, Hezbollah and Amal accused "armed and organised groups" of assaulting their supporters. "They were exposed to direct fire from snipers... followed by intense shooting," they said in a joint statement.

They said the violence was deliberate and aimed to drag the country into violence, while calling on their supporters to remain calm and de-escalate. Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV blamed the Lebanese Forces—a Christian party that is staunchly opposed to the Iran-backed group. AFP could not independently verify the claims.

### Last hope

Seen as a last hope for justice by many Lebanese but condemned as biased and corrupt by political leaders, Bitar has sparked deep divisions within the government between those who want to keep him in his place and those who are pushing for him to go. The Court of Cassation yesterday turned down a lawsuit filed by two ex-ministers demanding his replacement, a court official told AFP on the condition of anonymity. "Bitar does not fall under the court's jurisdiction so it does not have the authority to consider requests for his dismissal," the official said.

It is the second time this month that the judiciary has ruled in favor of the judge, who is hailed by human rights groups and relatives of blast victims as a symbol of judicial independence in a country where political impunity has long been the norm. The ruling, which goes into effect immediately, would allow Bitar to resume enquiries into the August 4, 2020 explosion which killed more than 200 people and destroyed large swathes of the capital. But the investigator's fate is all but clear as Hezbollah and Amal press ahead with a campaign aimed at removing him. —AFP