

Syria Seeks Legal Redress for Assaults in Lebanon

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The government of Syria has pledged to pursue justice for migrant workers who were attacked in Lebanon last week.

Social affairs and labour minister Diyala Hajj Aref said legal action would be taken against those believed to have committed the assaults on Syrian nationals. Quoted in the pro-government press, Aref insisted that "Syrian workers' rights will be protected inside and outside Syria".

Syrian newspapers reported that 12 people working in Lebanon were shot, stabbed and beaten when violence erupted after the pro-Damascus Hezbollah militia took over a number of neighbourhoods in Beirut.

The Syrian government has provided 50,000 lira, about 1,000 US dollars, for each of the victims.

Few details are known about the attacks, including where they occurred or how seriously the workers were injured. In one incident, two or more people were assaulted while travelling by minibus to their home country, according to the Syria News website. Some were taken to Syrian hospitals while others were treated in Lebanon.

The Syrian authorities have blamed the attacks on Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement, which is opposed to the government in Damascus.

It is not clear whether Damascus plans to take legal action against individuals, the Future Movement or the Lebanese government itself.

According to a Damascus-based lawyer, "It is very difficult to sue in such cases, because it's impossible to know who committed crimes in a civil war-type situation."

Thousands of Syrian nationals have worked in Lebanon, generally as manual labour, since the end of that country's civil war in the early Nineties. No official figures exist as to the number of Syrian expatriates in Lebanon, but news organisations in Syria cite a figure of around 400,000.

The workers face some resentment, both because of the role Damascus has played in Lebanon's internal politics, and because of the high unemployment in Lebanon.

"Syria dumps some of its economic problems on Lebanon, and some Lebanese target our workers for political reasons," said a political analyst in Damascus. "The workers end up as the victims."

Many workers earn about ten to 20 US dollars a day, about double what they would earn for the same work back in Syria. By providing Lebanon with cheap labour and also bringing money home, the labourers are

important to both economies.

However, the political analyst said the labourers are “a problem for Lebanon because they get wages from there, but don’t spend any money there”.

The London-based newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported last week that the flight of Syrians had badly affected the Lebanese construction and agricultural sectors.

Thousands of Syrians reportedly returned following the unrest in Lebanon, but many stayed behind.

The brother of a construction worker from Aleppo said the 24-year-old was now in hiding because he was too afraid to leave Lebanon following the attacks.

The construction worker had been in Lebanon for years, although he took some time out following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Syrian workers in Lebanon were assaulted and some were killed after the pullout and the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri the same year.

Now back in Lebanon, “he is afraid for sure, but he also has to make ends meet”, said his brother.

The political analyst said the Lebanese state should protect Syrian nationals from victimisation, but he acknowledged that “this isn’t easy in an unstable country divided by political conflicts”.

He noted, “Lebanese people were killing each other recently, and nobody was able to prevent that. A fragile sovereign state can’t offer protection to its own citizens or to foreigners.”

His conclusion? “There will be no realistic protection without a political settlement in Lebanon, and between Lebanon and Syria.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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