

Lebanese army chief urges troops to remain neutral

By [Global Research](#)

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Lebanon's army commander urged soldiers on Thursday to stay neutral in an increasingly tense Beirut and said concessions might be necessary to resolve a political crisis.

Thousands of Hezbollah-led opposition followers have been camping out near government headquarters since December 1 to try to topple Western-backed Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

The protests have sparked several sectarian clashes between Shi'ite Muslims, who back Hezbollah, and Siniora's Sunni supporters in Beirut.

"I call on you to be more alert..., to avoid interacting with the events and stay away from the current political polarization," General Michel Suleiman told troops in a memo released by the military.

"In your name ... I pledge to all the nation that the army will remain worthy of their trust, strong and unified, preserving security and stability ... "

Several thousand opposition activists packed two squares in central Beirut after nightfall on Thursday to watch a televised address by Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah on large screens. The group said the address, Nasrallah's first comments since the protests began last week, would air at 1830 GMT.

Thousands of pro-government supporters held a rally in Akkar in north Lebanon, the latest show of force by loyalists who have so far heeded calls to avoid large manifestations in Beirut.

The opposition is demanding the formation of a national unity government and accuses Siniora of failing to stand by pro-Syrian Hezbollah during a July/August war with Israel.

Suleiman was quoted by a local news agency this week as telling Siniora the showdown could get out of hand and the military might not be able to keep the peace. Lebanon has suffered two civil wars in the last 50 years.

In his memo, the army commander urged politicians to resolve the crisis, even if meant making concessions.

"Retreating from a personal position or seeking a solution for the sake of public interest is a courageous sacrifice ... and never a defeat," it said.

An anti-government protester was shot dead on Sunday in a Sunni neighborhood as he returned home from the city center demonstration. Thousands of soldiers and police are

deployed in the mainly Sunni parts of Beirut and around the city center.

Security sources said the army had arrested three suspects over the killing. It has also arrested several people who took part in night time disturbances in the capital.

The army, which has around 45,000 soldiers and officers, split along sectarian lines in the 1975-1990 civil war.

The opposition said on Wednesday it was ready to escalate its protests to topple Siniora's government and called for a mass demonstration on Sunday.

Siniora allies accuse their opponents of seeking to derail the setting up of an international tribunal to try suspects in the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, which many Lebanese blame on Syria, a charge Damascus denies.

Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt accused Syria and Iran of trying to destabilize Lebanon and asked for help from Europe. Speaking at a conference of European Socialists in Portugal on Thursday, Jumblatt said Siniora's government was "besieged by the Syrian allies, the Hezbollah."

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