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A private security worker takes pictures of a burned car that was set on fire early Tuesday by supporters of the Shiite Hezbollah and Amal Movement groups, in Beirut, Lebanon, Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2019. Supporters of Lebanon's two main Shiite groups Hezbollah and Amal clashed with security forces and set fires to cars in the capital early Tuesday, apparently angered by a video circulating online that showed a man insulting Shiite figures.(AP/Hussein Malla)

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Beirut — December 17, 2019

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Assailants attacked several protest camps in north and south Lebanon early on Dec. 17, according to state-run media, demolishing tents and burning down others as anger boiled over in the capital following a video deemed offensive to the country's Shiites.

The violence — some of it apparently carried out by Hezbollah supporters and their allies — threatened to plunge Lebanon further into chaos amid two months of anti-government protests and a spiraling financial crisis.

In Beirut, charred remains of several torched cars were scattered on a main avenue. Faint smoke smoldered from a fire set in a building overlooking the epicenter of the two-month-old protests, after a night of rage by supporters of Lebanon's two main Shiite groups, Hezbollah and Amal.

It was the third consecutive night of violence in Lebanon, coming after the Lebanese president on Dec. 16 postponed talks on naming a new prime minister, further prolonging the unrest in the Mediterranean country.

The violence was fueled by an undated video circulating online of a man, said to be living somewhere in Europe but otherwise from Lebanon's majority Sunni city of Tripoli, railing against Shiite politicians, religious figures and others. It was unclear what the link was between the video and the attacks on the protest camps. Although protesters stress their desire for an end for political and sectarian divisions, last night's violence illustrates the mounting tensions that have increased as the protests drag on.

Supporters of the militant Hezbollah group and the Amal movement, angered by protesters' criticism of their leaders, have tried to attack the protest camps for days. Late on Dec. 16, hundreds of angry men — apparently supporters of Hezbollah and Amal, which is led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri — descended on the camp in central Beirut.

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They clashed for hours with security forces guarding the camp, hurling stones and firecrackers and setting fire to several cars, trees and a building under construction overlooking the square. Police responded with tear gas and water cannons.

Ali Merhi, an electrician from the Beirut neighborhood where the assailants appear to hail from, said in response to the violence: "The people of this area are all against what happened yesterday, and things have calmed down ... but some are still holding a grudge."

The man whose video incited the violence later released another video apologizing for his words, stating that he "takes medicine and is sick," and that his insults were the result of a personal feud.

Shiite cleric Sheikh Muhammad Qasem Ayad from the neighborhood adjacent to the protest gathering appeared in an interview with LBC TV the night of Dec. 16 saying: "If the attackers really loved Hussein, let them evacuate the streets. These are not the ethics of the Shiites." The cleric was referring to the grandson of the Islam prophet Muhammad and one of the most revered figures in Shiite Islam.

Another protester from the northeastern region of Baalbak, Abbas Huwada, 34, said in Beirut that he is opposed to the violence, adding: "It doesn't matter if I am Shiite or Sunni. We are all Lebanese living under one flag. We need to be wiser. Someone comes out, makes a statement, and turns the country upside down."

Meanwhile, reports emerged of assailants attacking protest tents in northern Lebanon's Hermel district, in the southern city of Sidon and the town of Nabatiyeh, where the protesters are also Shiites. The assailants set fires to the tents in Sidon, and destroyed the ones in Nabatiyeh, according to the state-run National News Agency.

In the district of Hermel, fires raged in tents set up by protesters in the village of Fakeha after assailants lobbed a bomb into it, the agency said.

The anti-government protests, which erupted in mid-October, have spared no Lebanese politician, accusing the ruling elite of corruption and mismanagement, and calling for a government of independents. They have largely been peaceful, sparked by an intensifying economic crisis

Berri, the parliament speaker, and outgoing Prime Minister Saad Hariri met on Dec. 17 and urged the Lebanese to be aware from being "drawn toward strife" saying that some sides that they did not name are working to incite violence in the country. Both leaders called on the army and police to protect public and private property.