

Tunisia bloodied: At least 53 dead in clashes near Libyan border

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Tunis: Exceptionally deadly clashes between Tunisian forces and extremist attackers left at least 53 people dead today near Tunisia's border with Libya, the government said, amid growing fear that violence from Libya could destabilize the whole region.

Gunmen attacked the city of Ben Guerdane at dawn today and fighting continued into the evening. Tunisia closed its border with Libya and the Tunisian interior and defense ministers traveled to the town to oversee the operation, according to a joint statement from their ministries.

The Tunisian government didn't identify the attackers and no group claimed immediate responsibility, but two IS-affiliated websites said Islamic State group militants were engaged in the fighting.

"This is an unprecedented attack, planned and organized, and whose goal was probably to take control of this area and to announce a new emirate," said Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi.

The attack left 35 "terrorists," seven civilians and 11 members of Tunisia's security forces dead, according to the joint government statement.

A 12-year-old girl was among those who were killed.

Libya's chaos, five years after the uprising that led to the ouster and killing of longtime autocrat Moammar Gadhafi in 2011, has allowed the Islamic State group to take control of several cities. The divided country is ruled by two parliaments: an internationally recognized body based in the eastern city of Tobruk and a rival government, backed by Islamist-allied militias, that controls the capital, Tripoli.

Tunisia's fledgling democratic government is especially worried about the IS presence in Libya after dozens of tourists were killed in extremist attacks in Tunisia last year. IS extremists claimed responsibility for those attacks, and Tunisian authorities said the attackers had been trained in Libya.

At dawn today, gunmen targeted a police station and military facilities in Ben Guerdane, Tunisian Interior Ministry spokesman Yasser Mosbah told The Associated Press. A night curfew has been ordered in Ben Guerdane until further notice.

The nearby tourist cities of Djerba and Zarzis were not affected by the violence, the statement said.

France's foreign ministry condemned the attacks and identified the gunmen as "terrorists coming from Libyan territory." "This attack just reinforces the urgent need for a political solution in Libya," the ministry said in a statement, adding that Tunisia was targeted because of its "exemplary democratic transition.

- AP