

July 1, 2006

Bomb Rips Through Baghdad Market, Killing Dozens

By EDWARD WONG

BAGHDAD, IRAQ—A powerful suicide truck bomb ripped through a bustling street market in a Shiite slum here on Saturday, killing at least 62 people and injuring nearly 120 in the deadliest insurgent assault since the new Shiite-led government was installed in May, police officials and witnesses said.

The blast took place as a Sunni Arab member of the new Parliament and 8 of her bodyguards were abducted by militiamen while driving into Baghdad, police officials said. Together, the bomb attack and kidnapping pose the greatest challenge yet to the fledgling Iraqi government, which has deployed tens of thousands of Iraqi policemen and troops into the streets of Baghdad in recent weeks to try and secure the besieged capital.

New details emerged on Saturday about an American military investigation into soldiers from the Fourth Infantry Division who are accused of raping an Iraqi woman in her home and killing her and three family members, including a child. Investigators are looking into whether the soldiers monitored the family for a week before carrying out the assault, a military official in Iraq said. The soldiers are also accused of dousing the woman with a flammable liquid and setting her body on fire to cover up evidence of their crime.

The marketplace explosion on Saturday morning sent a thick column of smoke above the skyline of eastern Baghdad, minarets in the foreground, and ignited dozens of cars around the marketplace.

Ambulances raced through streets littered with smashed apple crates and wrecked stalls to carry wailing victims to nearby hospitals. As firefighters struggled to hose down the flames, Shiite militiamen tried coaxing angry mobs of onlookers to leave for fear of another bomb going off. A tarp covered the body of a donkey sprawled in a pool of its own blood.

American and Iraqi soldiers rolling up in Humvees were pelted with rocks by children. One American soldier pointed an assault rifle with a grenade launcher at the children to try scaring them off. Men and boys screamed out slurs about the Americans and the new Iraqi government.

“Look at this chaos, look at this mess,” said a militia leader who gave his name as Yahir Abu Ali, black prayer beads in one hand and a cigarette in the other. “You see these poor people? They’ve lost their means of living because of this.”

Karim Nasser, a fruit merchant sweating in a beige robe, waved wildly at the twisted metal debris of his stall. “A lorry filled with apples was trying to cross over the median

when it exploded,” he said. “I lost my stall; it was the only source of income for my family.”

The bombing was the deadliest in Iraq since early April, when three suicide bombers blew themselves up in a prominent Shiite mosque here, killing scores of worshippers. The explosion on Saturday occurred around 10 a.m. in the Sadr City neighborhood of Baghdad, a vast, fetid enclave of 2.5 million people who mostly follow Moktada al-Sadr, the radical Shiite cleric. The attack was likely to provoke more sectarian bloodshed, for Sadr City is the home base of the thousands-strong Mahdi Army militia, which rose up against the Americans twice in 2004 and often clashes with Sunni Arab fighters.

Mahdi militiamen rampaged through eastern Baghdad and other areas of Iraq after the February bombing of a sacred Shiite shrine, leaving hundreds dead.

A Sadr official, Abdul Zahira al-Suweidi, said in a telephone interview that the American occupiers were ultimately to blame for the explosion rather than militant Sunnis. “Yesterday, we asked the government for a timetable for the withdrawal of the occupation forces,” he said. “As long as they stay, terrorist activities will increase.”

The bombing came shortly after, Tayseer Najah al-Mashhadani, a new parliamentarian, and 8 of her guards were kidnapped while driving into Baghdad from her provincial home north of the capital. An official from Ms. Mashhadani’s party, citing a bodyguard who managed to escape, said militiamen operating a checkpoint in eastern Baghdad pulled everyone from the cars at gunpoint and dragged them away.

Since officially taking charge of Iraq in May, the new prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, has had to grapple with spiraling sectarian violence and rising hostility in the face of electricity and water shortages during 120-degree days. Mr. Maliki announced in early June the start of a broad security plan for Baghdad that involved deploying at least 50,000 Iraqi policemen and soldiers into the streets and increasing the number of checkpoints. The bloodletting has continued unabated, though, with bombings punctuating the sweltering summer days and tortured bodies turning up in alleyways, riverbanks and abandoned factories.

Nor has the brutality of this war lessened to any noticeable degree since the killing of Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in an American airstrike in early June.

While Mr. Zarqawi was alive, American commanders often attributed suicide bombings such as the one in Sadr City to him and his organization, Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Soon after Mr. Zarqawi’s death, American military officials said jihadists had anointed a new leader for Al Qaeda here, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian explosives expert trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The State Department announced on Friday a reward of \$5 million for any information leading to Mr. Masri.

The speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, from the same tribe as Tayseer al-Mashhadani, issued a statement Saturday afternoon condemning Ms. Mashhadani's kidnapping and demanding her immediate release. Ms. Mashhadani belongs to the Iraqi Islamic Party, a conservative Sunni Arab group that has often criticized the Shiite-led security forces and the American presence. The party's leader, Tarik al-Hashemi, is one of the country's two vice-presidents.

Ms. Mashhadani was driving into Baghdad for a Parliament meeting when she was stopped at a checkpoint by armed men in civilian clothes, said Hamdi Hassoun, a party official in Diyala Province, where Ms. Mashhadani lives. "They aimed their guns at the heads of the bodyguards and confiscated their guns and cell phones," Mr. Hassoun said, adding that one guard managed to escape. The abduction took place in the Shaab district of Baghdad, a restive area where sectarian violence is rampant.

Copyright 2006
The New York Times Company