

Clashes erupt in Iraq following government crackdown on Sunni protest site, at least 36 dead
By Associated Press, the Washington Post
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BAGHDAD — Iraqi security forces backed by helicopters raided a Sunni protest camp before dawn Tuesday, prompting clashes that killed at least 36 people in the area and significantly intensified Sunni anger against the Shiite-led government.

The fighting broke out in the former insurgent stronghold of Hawija, about 240 kilometers (160 miles) north of Baghdad. Like many predominantly Sunni communities, the town has seen months of rallies by protesters accusing the government of neglect and pursuing a sectarian agenda.

In an apparent response to the morning raid, militants tried to storm two army posts in the nearby town of Rashad, and six of them were killed, according to the Defense Ministry. Seven other militants were killed while trying to attack military positions in another town, Riyadh, according to police and hospital officials.

Outrage also spread through other Sunni parts of the country, including the restive western Anbar province, where demonstrators took to the streets and clashed with police.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki swiftly announced the formation of a special ministerial committee to investigate what happened in Hawija, underscoring the government's concern over the incident.

Sectarian tensions have been intensifying for months, pressured by Sunni protests that began in December and what officials fear is a strengthening of al-Qaida and other Sunni-backed militants. Hawija was the site of some of the fiercest fighting between U.S. and Iraqi forces who faced frequent deadly attacks by al-Qaida in Iraq and other insurgents. That raises fears that the growing anger among Sunnis could lead to a new round of violence.

As news of Tuesday's raid spread, calls went out through mosque loudspeakers in Fallujah, west of Baghdad, urging residents to protest in solidarity with fellow Sunnis in Hawija. About 1,000 protesters took to the streets in the western city, where anger at the government is particularly strong. Some chanted "War, war," as security forces fanned out in the streets.

In nearby Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, protesters threw stones at a military convoy. One army Humvee was overturned and set ablaze in the clashes, according to witnesses.

Iraq's Defense Ministry said 23 people were killed in the initial raid on Hawija. Among the dead were an army officer, two soldiers and 20 "militants who were using the demonstration as a safe haven." Another nine members of the military were wounded, the ministry said in a statement.

It said the militants killed were members of al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein's outlawed Baath Party.

Sheik Abdullah Sami al-Asi, a Sunni provincial official from Hawija, said the fighting began early in the morning when security forces entered the protest area and tried to make arrests. He said scores of people were wounded or killed.

The raid occurred four days after a checkpoint jointly run by the police and army near Hawija came under attack, and militants seized a number of weapons before retreating into the crowd of protesters, according to the Defense Ministry.

That led to a standoff with security forces, at times, trying to negotiate with local and tribal officials the handover of those involved in the raid.

The Defense Ministry said it warned demonstrators to leave the protest area before moving in early Tuesday, and that large numbers of protesters left the site. As Iraqi forces tried to make arrests, they

came under heavy fire from several types of weapons and were targeted by snipers, according to the Defense Ministry account.

Security forces detained 75 people and seized multiple weapons, including machine guns, hand grenades, knives, daggers and swords, the ministry said.

Iraq's Interior Ministry spokesman, Lt. Col. Saad Maan Ibrahim, said the security forces were backed by helicopters, but no airstrikes occurred.

A United Nations spokeswoman in Iraq, Eliana Nabaa, urged both sides to avoid further violence.

"Stop immediately the use of weapons," she said.

Protests against the Shiite-dominated government began in western Iraq in December following the arrest of bodyguards assigned to Sunni Finance Minister Rafia al-Issawi. The rallies quickly spread to other areas that are home to Iraq's minority Sunni Arabs, including Hawija.

Demonstrators are protesting alleged discrimination by the government, including the application of a tough anti-terrorism law that they believe unfairly targets their sect.

The protests have been largely peaceful, though there have been occasional incidents of violence. In January, at least five protesters were killed in clashes with security forces in Fallujah.

The violence comes three days after Iraqis in much of the country cast ballots for provincial officials. Voting was delayed in Anbar and Ninevah provinces, which have faced large protests, because of what the government said were concerns about security.

The Cabinet announced Tuesday that voting is now scheduled in those provinces for July 4.

Also Tuesday, two bombs went off near a Sunni mosque in the southern Baghdad neighborhood of Dora, killing seven worshippers and wounding 17, police and health officials said. The worshippers were leaving the mosque after morning prayers at around 5:00 a.m. when the bombs exploded simultaneously, two police officers said.

A medical official confirmed the causality figures. All officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to release information.

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