

Spate of attacks kills 107 across Iraq



By Kareem Raheem

BAGHDAD (Reuters) - At least 107 people were killed in bomb and gun attacks in Iraq on Monday, a day after 20 died in explosions, in a coordinated surge of violence against mostly Shi'ite Muslim targets.

The bloodshed, which coincided with an intensifying of the conflict in neighboring Syria, pointed up the deficiencies of the Iraqi security forces, which failed to prevent insurgents from striking in multiple locations across the country.

As well as the scores of deaths, at least 268 people were wounded by bombings and shootings in Shi'ite areas of Baghdad, the Shi'ite town of Taji to the north, the northern cities of Kirkuk and Mosul and many other places, hospital and police sources said, making it one of Iraq's bloodiest days in weeks.

No group has claimed responsibility for the wave of assaults but a senior Iraqi security official blamed the local wing of al Qaeda, made up of Sunni Muslim militants hostile to the Shi'ite-led government, which is friendly with Iran.

"Recent attacks are a clear message that al Qaeda in Iraq is determined to spark a bloody sectarian war," the official said, asking not to be named.

"With what's going on in Syria, these attacks should be taken seriously as a potential threat to our country. Al Qaeda is trying to push Iraq to the verge of Shi'ite-Sunni war," he said. "They want things to be as bad as in Syria."

Iraq, whose desert province of Anbar, a Sunni heartland, borders Syria, is nervous about the impact of the conflict in its neighbor where mainly Sunni rebels are fighting to end President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-dominated rule.

The Iraqi government said on Monday it rejected Arab League calls for Assad to quit, saying it was for the Syrian people alone to decide his fate and others "should not interfere".

Arab League foreign ministers meeting in Doha earlier in the day offered Assad a "safe exit" if he stepped down swiftly.

Baghdad advocates reform in Syria, rather than endorsing calls by Sunni-ruled Gulf nations for Assad's removal.

The last two days of attacks in Iraq shattered a two-week lull in violence in the run-up to the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan, which Iraqis began observing on Saturday.

Sectarian slaughter peaked in 2006-2007 but deadly attacks have persisted while political tensions among Iraq's main Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish factions have increased since U.S. troops completed their withdrawal in December.

"I ask the government if security forces are capable of keeping control," a man named Ahmed Salim shouted angrily at the scene of a car bomb in Kirkuk. "With all these bloody bombs and innocent people killed, the government should reconsider its security plans," he told Reuters Television.

TRAIL OF DESTRUCTION

The security forces themselves were often the targets or victims of the assaults perpetrated across Iraq.

Gunmen using assault rifles and hand grenades killed at least 16 soldiers in an attack on an army post near Dhuluiya, 70 km (45 miles) north of Baghdad, police and army sources said.

In Taji, 20 km north of Baghdad, six explosions, including a car bombing, occurred near a housing complex. A seventh blast there caused carnage among police who had arrived at the scene of the earlier ones. In all, 32 people were killed, including 14 police, with 48 wounded, 10 of the police.

Two car bombs struck near a government building in Sadr City, a vast, poor Shi'ite swathe of Baghdad, and in the mainly Shi'ite area of Hussainiya on the outskirts of the capital, killing a total of 21 people and wounding 73, police said.

Nine people, including six soldiers, were killed in attacks in the northern city of Mosul, police and army sources said.

In Kirkuk, five car bombs killed six people and wounded 17, while explosions and gun attacks on security checkpoints around the restive province of Diyala killed six people, including four soldiers and policemen, and wounded 30, police sources said.

Other deadly attacks occurred in the towns of Khan Bani Saad, Udham, Tuz Khurmato, Samarra and Dujail, all north of Baghdad, as well as in the southern city of Diwaniya.

The orchestrated spate of violence followed car bombs on Sunday in two towns south of Baghdad and in the Shi'ite shrine city of Najaf that killed 20 people and wounded 80.

Last month was one of the bloodiest since the U.S. withdrawal, with at least 237 people killed and 603 wounded.

Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis took refuge in Syria from bloodshed that lasted for years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Last week the Iraqi government urged them to return home to escape the violence in Syria.

At least 80 buses laden with returning Iraqi refugees crossed the border last week, a U.N. spokeswoman said.

Iraq's Shi'ite-led government is also worried about the longer-term implications if Assad falls and Syria's majority Sunnis overthrow the supremacy of the president's Alawite sect, which traces its roots to Shi'ite Islam.

A sectarian struggle for control in post-Assad Syria could raise tensions across the border and damage Iraq's chances of overcoming its own formidable security and political challenges.

(Additional reporting by Ahmed Rasheed; Writing by Alistair Lyon; Editing by Angus MacSwan)

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