

Iraq attacks kill nearly 50 people
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(BAGHDAD) -- A suicide bomber blew himself up among a crowd of Shiite pilgrims in Baghdad and another detonated his explosives inside a cafe north of the capital, the deadliest of several attacks across Iraq on Saturday that killed at least 48 people.

The killings, which also included attacks on journalists and anti-extremist Sunni fighters, are part of the deadliest surge in violence to hit Iraq in five years. The accelerating bloodshed is raising fears that the country is falling back into the spiral of violence that brought it to the edge of civil war in the years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.

The pilgrims were targeted late Saturday as they passed through the largely Sunni neighborhood of Azamiyah en route to a prominent shrine in the nearby Shiite neighborhood of Kazimiyah, according to police officials.

At least 24 people, including four policemen manning the checkpoint, were killed and 50 others were wounded, the officials said.

Around the same time, another suicide bomber blew himself up in a cafe in the town of Balad, a largely Shiite town surrounded by Sunni communities about 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of Baghdad. Balad Mayor Malik Lefta said at least 13 people were killed and 22 were wounded in that attack. He said the cafe was the same one hit by a deadly suicide bombing in August.

A hidden bomb also exploded inside a cafe in the religiously mixed Baghdad neighborhood of Baiyaa, killing three people and wounding 13, police said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the day's violence. Al-Qaida's Iraq arm often deploys suicide bombers and targets Shiite civilians in an effort to undermine confidence in the Shiite-led government.

Earlier in the day, gunmen shot dead a reporter and a cameraman for the privately owned al-Sharqiya TV channel while they were working on a report in the northern city of Mosul, according to police. The city is a former Sunni insurgent stronghold that has been one of the hardest areas of Iraq to tame. Al-Sharqiya identified the correspondent as Mohammed Karim al-Badrani and the cameraman as Mohammed Ghanem. It was not immediately clear why they were targeted.

Al-Sharqiya is one of several independent channels that took to the airwaves following the 2003 ouster of former dictator Saddam Hussein. It has drawn the ire of the current Shiite-led government with critical reports highlighting corruption, poor services and other shortcomings. Authorities suspended its operating license along with those of eight other Iraqi channels and pan-Arab broadcaster Al-Jazeera in April after accusing them of inflaming sectarian tensions.

The channel's news director, Ali Wajih, said in a phone interview that he had not received any information from Mosul police, and he hoped the killings would be investigated.

"This is not new for al-Sharqiya. This is usual for Iraq, that they kill journalists," he said, adding that 16 of the channel's employees have been killed since 2003. Among them are four who were kidnapped and killed in 2008 while on assignment in Mosul.

Iraq was the deadliest country in the world for journalists between 2003 and 2008. Although members of the media continue to face intimidation, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has not reported a murder of a journalist in the country since September 2011.

At least six members of Sunni militias opposed to al-Qaida were also killed Saturday. The militiamen were members of the Sahwa, which joined U.S. troops in the fight against al-Qaida at the height of Iraq war. Its members have since been frequently targeted by Sunni insurgents, who consider them traitors. Gunmen attacked a two car convoy carrying local Sahwa leader Issa al-Sabeel in the predominantly Sunni town of Hawija, said police chief Col. Fattah Mahmoud Yassin. He said the militia leader survived but three of his bodyguards were killed.

Hawija, 240 kilometers (150 miles) north of Baghdad, was the scene of a deadly shooting at an anti-government protest by Iraqi security forces in April.

A bomb also hit a checkpoint manned by Sahwa members in the town of Youssifiyah, south of the Iraqi capital, killing three of the fighters and wounding five other people, police said.

Hospital officials confirmed the casualties provided by the unnamed police officials. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to journalists.