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56 Kurds Killed in Suicide Blasts in North of Iraq

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN and EDWARD WONG

ERBIL, Iraq, Feb. 1 — Two suicide bombers killed at least 56 people and wounded at least 200 here on Sunday during Muslim holiday celebrations inside the separate headquarters of Iraq's two leading Kurdish political parties, officials said. The blasts shattered the calm of the north, a part of the country that had been relatively stable under the American occupation.

The bombers killed several top Kurdish leaders and wounded other senior officials in the explosions, which came 10 minutes apart and constituted the worst attack in Iraq since late August, when a car bomb killed more than 80 people outside a Shiite shrine in the southern city of Najaf.

The bombings here came at a time when the two rival Kurdish parties have been trying to unite the divided administrations of the northern region to strengthen their demands to retain autonomy in that area.

The two parties had been using their Erbil headquarters reception areas for the first day of a festival celebrating the end of the hajj, when devout Muslims travel to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. American military officials have said they expected an increase of violence during the four-day holiday, but there was little preparation for the possibility that suicide bombers strapped with explosives would walk virtually unnoticed into celebrations here.

Some officials said the attacks bore the signatures of foreign fighters or Ansar al-Islam, a mostly Kurdish terrorist group that American officials suspect has ties to Al Qaeda. The group was based near the mountainous Iranian border until American forces routed it last year with the help of Kurdish fighters.

At the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, a blast blew out every ceiling panel, curled the blades of ceiling fans, peeled off wallpaper and left charred and bloody remains across the floor.

At the time of the explosion, around 11 a.m., more than 200 people, including children, were packed into the reception hall, according to guards who had been there. They were exchanging greetings, eating chocolates and paying respects to Kurdish leaders.

That was when a lean man in his 20's walked into the reception hall wearing a bulging photographer's vest, said Aziz Ali Achmad, chief of security for the headquarters.

"He came up, reached for a minister's hand, and then all of a sudden there was a horrible noise and fire everywhere," Mr. Achmad said.

Mr. Achmad said nobody was searched before entering the hall, despite his urging.

"I kept telling the sheiks, 'Please let us search people,' and they said, 'No, we will not bother them, not today,' " Mr. Achmad said.

A witness provided a similar account of an explosion at the headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

It was unclear to what degree the attacks were a result of rising ethnic and religious tensions in Iraq. Except in the hotly contested oil-rich city of Kirkuk, the Kurds have generally not been involved in sectarian violence, and the Kurdish region has been considered one of the safest parts of Iraq. Relatively free of assassinations, roadside explosions and suicide bombings, the region is one where American soldiers can be seen occasionally walking around unarmed and eating in restaurants.

L. Paul Bremer III, the top American administrator in Iraq, said in a statement that the bombings "constituted a cowardly attack on human beings as well as on the very principle of democratic pluralism in Iraq."

The Kurdish region has existed as a virtually independent state since 1991, when the American and British governments declared it a no-flight zone and protected Kurds from Saddam Hussein's forces. The Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan each govern half the region.

"Certainly this was an attack against the stability and security in the Kurdish region," said Bakhtiyar Amin, a spokesman for Mahmoud Othman, an independent Kurdish member of the Iraqi Governing Council, who was on his way to one of the buildings at the time of the attacks. "They are forces of darkness and they want to bring Iraq back to an age of tyranny."

Mr. Amin predicted that the attacks on Sunday would draw the two main Kurdish parties — which went to war against each other in the mid-1990's — closer together and strengthen their resolve for autonomy. Party leaders say they want a unified regional government that will retain much of the independence the Kurds have enjoyed, though the parties are willing to cede matters of monetary, foreign and national defense policy to a central Iraqi government.

"These attacks could be better prevented by unity, by joining forces," Mr. Amin said. "I hope this will expedite the process."

The two parties have been in talks since the summer to unite their regional administrations. Those talks have accelerated in the past couple of months, and Kurdish leaders say they expect to reach an agreement well before the Bush administration transfers sovereignty to an Iraqi government, which is supposed to happen on June 30.

Mr. Amin said the parties had agreed in principle several weeks ago that the prime minister of a united region would come from the Kurdistan Democratic Party and his deputy from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, while the top two officers of the parliament would come from the two parties in reverse order. The ministries of the rival administrations would be combined, he said.

Several Governing Council officials say autonomy for the Kurds, who make up a fifth of Iraq's population, is one of the most sensitive issues confronting them as they try to complete an interim constitution by Feb. 28. The committee writing the document opened debate over a first draft on Saturday. That draft calls for a three-person joint presidency shared by one Shiite Arab, one Sunni Arab and one Kurd.

Some Kurdish officials insist that the two Kurdish parties should be able to keep their militias, called pesh merga, in some form, a demand that has become a delicate issue with the Governing Council because American officials are trying to disband militias. The attack on Sunday could bolster the Kurds' argument that they need to retain the pesh merga — which means "those who face death" — for security.

On Sunday night, pesh merga essentially shut down Erbil, a city of around one million people. Sentries established roadblocks at all major intersections and searched cars.

At the headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, a guard's description of the morning attack mirrored the accounts of the bombing in the reception hall of the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

"A man walked up to Shakhawan Abbas," a member of the patriotic union's leadership council, "and while he was shaking his hand, he exploded himself," said the guard, who gave his name as Mahmoud.

The guard said investigators were checking a videotape taken right before the bombing to identify the bomber. Many people here blamed Ansar al-Islam. They also cited as suspects insurgents from the restive Sunni Arab areas to the south. American military officials have said there is "a rat line" of insurgents flowing north.

As a cold drizzle fell Sunday night, crowds huddled around the gates of Erbil's hospitals. "My son, my son," one man moaned as he collapsed against a friend outside Erbil Emergency Hospital.

Achmad Umer, a farmer in traditional baggy Kurdish dress, with pants pulled up high, waited nearby to hear about his cousin.

"They tried to erase our leaders," Mr. Umer said. "And they took many innocents along the way."

Among the leaders killed were Sami Abdul Rahman, the deputy head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and Saad Abdullah, a high-ranking official in the same party.

Kurdish officials declared a state of emergency and appealed for donations of blood.

The Erbil bombings overshadowed violence elsewhere in Iraq on Sunday. In the southwest, at least 20 looters were killed when they accidentally set off a munitions bunker guarded by Polish soldiers, Polish military officials said, according to The Associated Press. The looters were apparently trying to steal rockets, artillery shells and other weapons stored by Mr. Hussein's army. Near Balad, in central Iraq, one American soldier was killed and 12 others were wounded in a rocket attack on a support base.

Jeffrey Gettleman reported from Erbil for this article and Edward Wong from Baghdad.

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