

Close to 1,000 dead in Baghdad tragedy

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At least 953 people were trampled to death or drowned during a panicked stampede on a bridge in Baghdad on Wednesday. With the exception perhaps of the death toll in Fallujah during the first days of the American military's assault on the city last November, the tragedy is the largest loss of life in Iraq since the US-led invasion in March 2003.

Tens of thousands of people were making their way across the bridge to join an annual ceremony venerating a Shiite saint at Baghdad's Kadhimiyyah mosque. Someone on the eastern side began shouting that a suicide bomber was among the crowd and the rumour triggered hysteria.

Two hours earlier, assailants claiming to be linked to Al Qaeda, which regards Shiite Muslims as heretics, had fired mortar rounds at the mosque, killing seven people.

Fearful of another attack, people attempted to flee the bridge in both directions, but were hemmed in by the crowd and security checkpoints at the bridge entrance designed to restrict entry to just one or two individuals. Iraqi government troops and police aggravated the panic by firing shots into the air. Thousands of people were trampled or pushed over the bridge railings to fall some 30 metres into the Tigris River below.

A young man told a *Washington Post* correspondent: "I saw an old woman who was completely panicked and crying throw herself from the bridge. I saw another man fall on the bricks on the shore and die immediately. I saw seven people who were brought dead near the end of the bridge, smothered."

Another eyewitness told the *Post*: "Whoever was able to swim and knew how to swim survived. The people who didn't know how died."

Without providing any evidence, government spokesmen immediately blamed the deaths on "terrorists". While the mortar attacks may have been the work of Islamic fanatics linked to Al Qaeda, it is

unclear whether the stampede was deliberately provoked, and if so by whom. If it was premeditated, it played directly into the hands of the US and its allies, which are deeply concerned at the growing unity between Sunni and Shiite opponents of the occupation.

The majority of those who died were women, children and elderly people from Sadr City, the working class district of Baghdad controlled politically by the loyalists of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Over past weeks, an alliance had begun to develop between the main Sunni organisations and Sadrist movement, based on mutual opposition to the draft constitution, which was ratified by the US-backed Iraqi government on Sunday and will be put to a referendum by October 15. (See: "Iraq's draft constitution: a recipe for neo-colonial rule")

Last Friday an estimated 100,000 people took part in demonstrations organised by the Sadrist movement in cities across Iraq to denounce the draft constitution as a pro-US document and a threat to the unity of Iraq. Rallies were held at the beginning of the week in major Sunni centres, hailing Sadr and other Shiite leaders who have spoken out against the constitution and calling for the unity of all Iraqis against the occupation. The main Sunni spokesman against the constitution, Salih al-Mutlaq, told Al Jazeera on Monday: "We would like to cooperate with Moqtada al-Sadr and very soon we will start negotiations with him."

The possibility has been widely raised that a coalition between the Sadrists and the main Sunni organisations could mobilise the necessary votes in the October referendum to defeat the constitution. A two-thirds "No" vote in just three of Iraq's 18 provinces is all that is required to reject the document. A Sadrist-Sunni bloc would potentially gain the necessary votes against the constitution in four to five provinces, including Baghdad.

Even in a country that has seen as many as 100,000 of

its people die since the US invasion, the bridge disaster has produced an outpouring of shock, grief and anger. Thus far, however, it has not fueled sectarianism or been followed by communal violence.

In fact, in the midst of the stampede, Sunni residents of the suburb of Adhamiyah, which is located on the eastern side of the bridge, immediately came to the aid of Shiites who had fallen into the river. The *Washington Post* account reported a Sunni sheik mobilising a “small armada of motor boats and rowboats... to help pull victims to shore”. An Adhamiyah local told the paper: “We ran with pickups, cars, anything that we can use to carry the bodies.”

The Sadrist movement has blamed the US-backed government for failing to provide sufficient protection to the Shia ceremony. Baha al-Aaraji, a member of the Iraqi parliament connected to al-Sadr, told the media: “This is a result of the inadequate performance of the interior and defence ministers, which has caused such a loss of life. They should be made to stand in front of the National Assembly and be questioned. If it is proven that they have failed to fulfill their responsibilities, they should be dismissed and stand trial.”

In the face of the condemnation, Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari declared an official three days of mourning. Animosity toward his government is mounting though. An attempt by thousands of Shiite supporters of Sadr to stage an anti-government demonstration on the bridge yesterday was fired on by police.

In the final analysis, responsibility for this terrible tragedy rest with the Bush administration. Whatever triggered the incident on Wednesday, the panic is the direct result of the extreme political and social tensions created by the US occupation in Baghdad and throughout the country.

The sectarian tensions are the outcome of a conscious policy by the White House to stoke ethnic and religious divisions and split the opposition to the US ambitions to plunder the country's oil resources. It is encapsulated in a draft constitution that would cede substantial powers to oil-rich regional governments in the Kurdish north and Shiite south of the country where the ruling elites supported the US invasion in order to gain power, privilege and wealth at the expense of the Iraqi people as a whole.



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