

Huge bomb blast in Baghdad inflames sectarian tensions

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6 February 2007

A horrific suicide bombing on Saturday in a predominantly Shiite market in central Baghdad killed 137 people and maimed at least another 300. Similar atrocities over the past week have claimed more than 1,000 lives—graphic testimony to the nightmarish conditions in US-occupied Iraq.

Sunday's bombing was the single most devastating such attack since the US invasion close to four years ago. The bomber detonated a truck packed with close to one tonne of explosives in the middle of one of the main fruit and vegetable markets in the city. Dozens of people were blown apart. Apartments and shops in the vicinity of the blast collapsed, killing entire families. The bomb was so large it created a crater close to five metres in diameter and nearly two metres deep. A witness told the *Washington Post*: "It's a massacre. It's like a slaughterhouse. You can see blood everywhere."

The bombing was a criminal and senseless act of sectarian violence that in no way challenged the US occupation forces or the Iraqi puppet government headed by Nouri al-Maliki. The victims were men, women and children who were targeted solely because the bomber assumed they were Shiites. The market is located in the Shiite district of Al-Sadiriya. It was bombed in January and last December as well.

Baghdad's dysfunctional health system could not cope with the casualties. People seeking to donate blood were reportedly turned away due to a lack of staff. According to Agence France Presse, police established a cordon and prevented ambulances from evacuating the injured due to rumours that another suicide bomber was in the area. Outraged survivors threw rocks at the police lines and at least one officer was severely beaten.

Across the Shiite suburbs of Iraq's capital, the

population is blaming the Bush administration for the ability of suspected Sunni extremists to carry out the attack. An elderly man told a *New York Times* correspondent: "Maliki and the Americans are sons of dogs because they do nothing to protect us."

Until recently, the Mahdi Army militia loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr provided a degree of security for Shiite neighbourhoods, maintaining vehicle checkpoints and conducting armed patrols. The Mahdi Army, however, is now being targetted by Washington as the greatest threat to its grip over Iraq. The militia has been assembled from the urban working class and poor, who are hostile to the presence of American troops and any further US aggression in the Middle East. Moqtada al-Sadr warned last year that the Shiite militiamen would rise up against the occupation if the Bush administration launched a war on Iran.

The additional 17,500 American troops being deployed over the coming weeks to Baghdad are intended for use in a major offensive to shatter the Mahdi Army. Desperate to cling on to their position in the Maliki government and the new Iraqi state, the Sadrist leadership has ordered the Shiite fighters to go to ground and offer no resistance to the US military. The resulting security vacuum has been exploited by the forces that want to escalate the sectarian conflict that is claiming the lives of more than 6,000 people in Baghdad each month.

The anger over the mass killing in Al-Sadiriya will intensify Shiite demands that the Sadrist leadership order the Mahdi Army back into the streets. The Sadrists are already under intense pressure to defy the occupation forces due to the steadily escalating provocations against their militia. Over the past two months, the US military claims to have detained more than 600 Shiite fighters, including 16 important

commanders.

On Sunday, the Sadrist leader in Diyala province, Ali Khazim, was killed during a US raid. According to one report, he was bayoneted. A spokesman for Sadr, Saleh al-Ageili, told Associated Press: "What has happened to Khazim is part of the series of provocative acts by the occupation forces against the Sadr movement. The occupation forces know well who are the terrorists and their whereabouts, yet they are targeting our people." Unknown assassins also killed a Sadrist leader in the southern city of Basra.

The longer Sadr refuses to sanction a response, the more his credibility and authority will wane. Hundreds of militiamen are believed to have already broken away from the Mahdi Army and are blamed for both attacks on US forces and much of the sectarian violence that is wracking Baghdad.

Extremists among the Shiite community launched indiscriminate attacks on Sunnis in retaliation for Saturday's bombing. Militiamen unleashed mortar strikes on Sunni areas of the city, killing and wounding an unknown number of innocent civilians and inflaming communal tensions. On Monday, bombs were exploded in two Sunni suburbs, killing at least 23 people. The bodies of dozens of murdered Sunni men were found in the streets, the victims of suspected Shiite death squads.

Tensions are also building in the northern city of Kirkuk. On Sunday, seven car bombs were detonated in Kurdish areas of the city, killing at least two people and wounding more than 30.

By the end of the year, a referendum must be held in Kirkuk to decide if it will be incorporated into the Kurdish autonomous region established in northern Iraq. The Kurdish nationalist parties want control of the city and surrounding area, which includes the country's northern oil fields. Ethnic Arabs and Turkomen who live in the city oppose being incorporated into a Kurdish statelet due to fears of discrimination.

The conflict is spiralling into daily communal killings. Arab and Turkomen organisations have accused Kurdish-dominated army and police units and Kurdish militias of carrying out a policy of ethnic cleansing, seeking to drive non-Kurds out of the city so as to guarantee a "yes" vote in the referendum. In response, hundreds of Mahdi Army fighters have travelled to the city from other parts of Iraq to defend

the largely Shiite Arab community.

The political responsibility for the burgeoning sectarian conflict in Iraq lies squarely with Washington. US policies in Iraq have deliberately fomented the divisions among the country's ethnic and religious communities in order to cut across any united struggle against the occupation. The ensuing sectarian fighting has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and forced an estimated 1.7 million Iraqis from their homes. The outbreak of civil war in Kirkuk would potentially create many more refugees.



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