

# US escalates siege in Baghdad's Sadr City

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US forces continued their siege against Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood on Tuesday, leaving dozens dead. The US military said a four-hour firefight broke out around 9:30 a.m. between US forces and militiamen as a US soldier injured by small-arms fire was being evacuated.

US military spokesman Lt. Col. Steven Stover said a vehicle involved in the evacuation was hit by two roadside bombs, gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades, and that at least 28 "extremists" were killed in the pursuant fighting. Six US soldiers reportedly suffered non-life-threatening injuries.

Accounts from Sadr City residents, however, contradicted the American military's version of events. They said US helicopters launched two rockets, beginning at around 1 p.m., destroying six homes in the neighborhood, killing 20 civilians and injuring 50 others.

Lt. Col. Stover claimed there were no US air strikes on Tuesday and that US ground forces had launched rockets at "militants firing from buildings, alleyways and rooftops." Stover said these occupation forces utilized a guided multiple-launch rocket system that fires high-explosive warheads weighing 200 pounds each. "We have every right to defend ourselves," he said.

Residents said the US rockets were fired one after the other, with the second striking people rushing to evacuate others from buildings hit by the first round. One man said he saw the bodies of four people, including women and children. An Agence France Presse (AFP) photo shows a man crying as he looked at dead bodies buried in the rubble.

Eyewitness Abu Ahmed said, "We were surprised that a rocket was fired at these houses, which are not on the main street but in the middle of the block. When we rushed to save the people another targeted the same area."

AP Television News footage showed men carrying several blood-soaked injured people onto stretchers to take them to a local emergency hospital, where the dead were placed in wooden coffins. The footage also showed children running for cover behind walls amid the gunfire.

Officials at the Imam Ali and al-Sadr general hospitals

said about 25 people had died and dozens were wounded and that most of the victims were civilians.

The US operation in the sprawling Sadr City neighborhood of more than 2 million is in its second month. It began last month following the offensive launched by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki against the Mahdi Army militia, loyal to the nationalist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose followers are drawn from Iraq's largely poor, working class Shia population.

According to figures compiled by AFP, more than 400 people have been killed in the neighborhood since the siege began. This figure undoubtedly underestimates the death toll as it is drawn from official Iraqi government and US military figures. The dead have also included many civilians, killed in attacks such as those on Tuesday. The US figures indicate that 80 Iraqis have been killed in the area since Sunday.

Tuesday's clashes took place along a road where the US is constructing a concrete wall to cut off the free movement of people in and out of Sadr City, with the stated aim of stopping such attacks. Civilians imprisoned within its confines are subject to increasing attack from US forces.

US forces have been unable to gain any ground in Sadr City, meeting strong resistance from fighters loyal to al-Sadr. Even attempts to sustain a presence on the neighborhood's southeastern edge have been unsuccessful, and the US has responded with ever-greater firepower.

Coinciding with the escalation of US operations in Sadr City, the US military has ordered an unprecedented number of air strikes by unmanned airplanes aimed at insurgents launching rockets at American forces.

In particular, they are targeting rockets and mortars fired from Sadr City and other neighborhoods into the heavily fortified Green Zone, which houses the Iraqi government and the US and other embassies. Four US soldiers were killed on Monday in Baghdad by such fire, bringing US casualties in April to 44, the highest toll since September 2007.

The US military carried out 11 attacks by the unmanned Predator drones in April, nearly double the previous monthly high. Defense Secretary Robert Gates last week called on the Air Force to rush more drones to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Predator is an unmanned aerial vehicle that can be used for intelligence gathering, and which can also carry and fire two laser-guided AGM-114 Hellfire missiles. The drones can be piloted remotely from bases in the US, where an operator directs cameras and radar to collect intelligence. Military personnel then select targets, firing on and destroying vehicles, buildings and other targets.

Air Force Lt. Col. Scott Murray, director of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance at the Combined Air and Space Operations Center in southwest Asia, said the drones can stay aloft for several hours, surveying their targets. "It's like having your own personal satellite over your target," Loren Thompson, a military analyst at the Lexington Institute, commented to *USA Today*.

The Pentagon recently reported that the US military operates 24 around-the-clock Predator patrols in Iraq and Afghanistan, up from eight such patrols less than a year ago. In operation since 1995, in addition to their use in Iraq and Afghanistan the unmanned drones have been used in combat over Bosnia, Serbia and Yemen.

In a statement last week, Gen. David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq, praised the drone missions. "The Predator teams have just been doing unbelievable work down there [in Basra] and in Baghdad as well," he said. The result of this work has been an escalation of the violence and death meted out against the Iraqi population.



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