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Iraq suicide bomber kills at least 20 policemen

AP Monday 20 June 2005



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A suicide bomber blew himself up in the middle of morning roll call today outside traffic police headquarters in the northern Kurdish city of Irbil, killing at least 20 and wounding 50 more, police said.

A suicide bomber blew himself up in the middle of morning roll call today outside traffic police headquarters in the northern Kurdish city of Irbil, killing at least 20 and wounding 50 more, police said.

The bomber disguised himself as a policeman and joined the early morning gathering of some 200 traffic policemen, said police Col. Mohammed Saleh and Lt. Col. Abdul-Salam Zibari.

The attack occurred on a main street that leads to the oil-rich northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk, which is south of Irbil, police said.

Irbil is one of two major cities in Iraq's northern Kurdish region, which has enjoyed autonomous rule since 1991 under Western protection. The area has been largely sheltered from the incessant violence wracking the remainder of Iraq, but has seen several major bombings blamed on militant Muslim groups.

The attack came a day after a suicide bomber walked into a crowded Baghdad kebab restaurant, killing at least 23 people - the deadliest attack in the capital in just over six weeks.

The Baghdad bomber detonated his explosives-laden vest at the Ibn Zambour restaurant, 400 yards from the main gate of the heavily fortified Green Zone - US and Iraqi government headquarters. The cafe was popular with Iraqi police and soldiers.

The dead included seven police officers. The bodyguards of Iraqi Finance Minister Ali Abdel-Amir Allawi and 16 other police were injured, police and hospital officials said. The minister was not in the restaurant.

The explosion yesterday was the bloodiest attack on a day of

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relentless insurgent violence that claimed at least 45 lives across the country despite twin US- Iraqi offensives against militant smuggling routes and training centres west and north of Baghdad.

The American military announced the death of the first US Marine since two new operations, code-named Spear and Dagger, began on Friday and Saturday, respectively, in Anbar province. About 1,000 US forces and Iraqi soldiers are taking part in each offensive.

Early today, a band of insurgents launched a bold assault on a Baghdad police station killing at least eight policemen and one baby, officials said. At least 23 were wounded.

The attack on the Baya police station in south-western Baghdad began just before dawn and included at least three car bombs, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire, police Capt. Talib Thamir said.

Separately, a roadside bomb killed a US soldier on patrol in northern Iraq today, the military said. The attack occurred near Tal Afar, 93 miles east of the Syrian border, the military said. The soldier belonged to the 1st Corps Support Command.

Also, US Marines reported killing 15 insurgents yesterday in battles near Fallujah, the Anbar province town 40 miles west of Baghdad and a perennial insurgent stronghold.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Al Qaida in Iraq claimed responsibility for the Baghdad restaurant bombing and said the attacker was from the border city of Qaim, near the westernmost of the two joint US-Iraqi offensives. The statement appeared on an Islamic website, but its authenticity couldn't be verified.

The suicide attack was the deadliest in Baghdad since May 7, when two suicide car bombers ploughed into an American security company convoy in Baghdad - killing at least 22 people.

Most of the suicide attackers are thought to belong to extremist groups such as al Qaida in Iraq, which has justified killing other Muslims, including women and children, in their quest to destabilise the Shiite-led government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

The rate of insurgent attacks has risen dramatically since al-Jaafari announced the makeup of his Cabinet on April 28. At least 1,171 people have been killed since that date.

Some extremists have also started threatening fellow Sunni Arabs, who make up the core of the insurgency, because some leaders of the minority Muslim sect have expressed a readiness to join the political process. Most Sunnis boycotted January's historic election.

Today, Sunni Arabs were expected to name their representatives to a committee that has until mid-August to draft Iraq's new constitution. The number of Sunni members took weeks to

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negotiate with the Shiite majority which now controls the government.

Operations Spear and Dagger are aimed at destroying militant networks near the Syrian border and north of Baghdad, the military said. About 60 insurgents have been killed and 100 captured so far.

Dozens of buildings in Karabilah, 200 miles west of Baghdad near Qaim, were destroyed after airstrikes and tank shelling.

Videotape from a freelance cameraman in western Iraq on Saturday showed what appeared to be the fuselage of an American-made CH-53 military helicopter sitting in a field with its rotor blades missing. Other damage was difficult to assess in the tape, made at a considerable distance. An unidentified group of people could be seen around the fuselage. The US military had no comment.

Troops on the ground said they found numerous foreign passports and one round trip air ticket from Tripoli, in Libya, to Damascus, Syria. They found two passports from Sudan, two from Saudi Arabia, two from Libya, two from Algeria and one from Tunisia.

Intelligence officials believe Anbar province is a portal for extremist groups, including al-Zarqawi's al Qaida in Iraq terrorist group, to smuggle in foreign fighters. Syria is under intense pressure from Washington and Baghdad to tighten control of its porous 380-mile border with Iraq.



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