



Suicide bomber wearing Iraqi army uniform blows himself up inside base

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BAGHDAD -- A suicide bomber disguised in an Iraqi army uniform blew himself up inside a base in Anbar province on Thursday in what Iraqi army and intelligence officials described as a grave breach of security.

The officials, however, provided starkly conflicting reports of casualties. Three army officials in Anbar, west of Baghdad, said the attack killed 15 soldiers and officers, contradicting official claims by commanders and the Ministry of Defense that no one died except the bomber. The tally of wounded ranged from as few as 17 to more than 50.

It was the second attack on security forces in Iraq in two days, punctuating a spike in bombings that have killed more than 70 people this month, including five American soldiers who died in a suicide truck bombing in northern Iraq last Friday.

The attack on Thursday took place just before lunchtime at Tamouz Air Base in Habbaniya, one of the largest and oldest military posts in Iraq, first established by the British in the 1920s.

Officials said the bomber wore a vest or belt of explosives, which he detonated as soldiers and officers of Iraq's 1st Division gathered near a mess hall for lunch after morning exercises.

While Iraqi troops are routinely targeted by bombings, often carried out by men disguised in uniforms, few attackers have succeeded in penetrating so deeply into a restricted military base.

"There is a security violation," Lt. Hussam Rahim, an officer at the base, said in an interview at a hospital in

Ramadi where many of the wounded were treated. "Someone helped him to enter the base."

The base, located on the Euphrates River between Falluja and Ramadi, houses a police academy opened by the American military and the headquarters of the Iraqi army's quick-reaction force. More than 10,000 troops are based there, and civilians are rarely allowed to enter.

Confusion often clouds accounts of attacks here, but rarely have senior officials offered such divergent reports about a death toll.

Maj. Gen. Merdhi Meshhin, the senior Iraqi commander in Anbar, said in a telephone interview that "only 17 soldiers were wounded" in the blast. Rahim said 26 were treated in Ramadi.

Journalists were prohibited from entering the base and the hospital, which Iraqi and American officers visited after the wounded arrived.

The American military reported an explosion at the base at 11:47 a.m., but provided no more details.

One of the three officials who reported 15 deaths suggested that commanders were playing down the toll, perhaps reflecting embarrassment over the security breach. The officials spoke only on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly and were contradicting their superiors.

Neither the official version of the death toll nor the unofficial one could be confirmed.

No group immediately claimed responsibility, but suicide bombings against security forces are a common tactic of al-Qaida in Iraq and other extremist groups.

Anbar is a vast, largely Sunni province that was once the center of the insurgency here but became relatively stable after former Sunni fighters joined an uprising against al-Qaida in late 2006 and early 2007 that became known as the Awakening.

Attacks still occur, though, and tensions have flared between former Sunni fighters and the Iraqi government over a spate of arrests of Awakening leaders and delays in paying and providing jobs to tens of thousands of Sunnis who joined forces with the Americans.

Last Saturday a suicide bomber killed 13 Awakening members receiving their pay in a village in Babil province, south of Baghdad. On Wednesday, a bomb in a parked car exploded in Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, killing 13, most of them security guards at an oil facility.

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