

## 4 GIs, 9 Iraqis killed in bombings, attacks

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Four US Marines died in a pair of roadside bombings in western Iraq's volatile Anbar province, the military said yesterday while nine Iraqis were killed in three separate bombings.

The second explosion killed two Iraqi civilians south of Baghdad.

Also Tuesday, two bombs exploded minutes apart near a square in central Baghdad, killing at least seven people and wounding about 20, police and hospital officials said.

The first bomb was in a plastic bag placed near a CD vendor's stand close to Tahrir Square by a man who fled seconds before the explosion at 9:55 a.m., said Capt. Mohammed Abdel Ghani.

The blasts highlight the constant danger posed by homemade bombs across Iraq, which have become the deadliest weapon used by mainly Sunni Arab insurgents against the US-led military presence in the country.

Three Marines were killed by a bomb blast Monday in Hit, 85 miles west of

Baghdad, according to a statement.

The victims were assigned to the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit that has operated in Anbar province since mid-December with an Iraqi army battalion.

Another Marine, attached to the 2nd Marine Division, II Marine Expeditionary Force, died from wounds caused by a bomb blast Sunday in an unspecified location within Anbar, which includes the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi.

The latest deaths take the number of US military personnel killed to at least 2,257 since the Iraq war began in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.

Early Tuesday, a roadside bomb struck a pickup truck south of Baghdad and killed two Iraqi civilians, while gunmen shot dead a supporter of fiery anti-US cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, police said.

The blast happened near a bridge in Yousiffiyah, 12 miles south of Baghdad, and destroyed the vehicle the two people were travelling in, said Capt. Muthana Khaled. It was unclear if the civilians were the target of the attack.

## Clashes in Nepal ahead of polls: 7 cops killed

Maoists call for boycott of today's vote

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels killed at least seven security force personnel in new clashes, the army said yesterday on the eve of local polls called by King Gyanendra as part of a pledge to restore democracy.

One guerrilla also died in the violence, the army said, amid tight security as a nationwide general strike called by the Maoists entered its third day.

The municipal elections are the first to be held in seven years in the impoverished Himalayan nation, which has been wracked by political turmoil.

Maoist leader Prachanda, whose call for a week-long general strike has ground Nepal to a virtual halt, Tuesday again urged voters not to take part in controversial local polls called by the king.

"Our party would like to make a final and special appeal to the general public ... to boycott the municipal polls and take the movement for democracy and peace to a new height," Prachanda said in an emailed statement.

The nationwide general strike called by the rebels had been effective and was a sign that few people would vote today, said Prachanda, whose name means "the fierce one".

"The success of our general strike has made it clear that the public opinion is against the municipal polls slated for tomorrow (Wednesday)," the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) chairman said.

The Maoists, fighting for the past decade to overthrow the monarchy, have stepped up violence in a bid to derail the polls that

the rebels and opposition parties say are a sham aimed at perpetuating Gyanendra's control of the tiny nation of 26 million people.

"Seven security personnel were killed in two separate overnight attacks in two different districts," an army headquarters official told AFP.

Three soldiers and two policemen died when rebels stormed the district headquarters town of Gaighat, 400 km east of Kathmandu late Monday. The body of a guerrilla was also found.

A soldier and a policeman were killed during a rebel attack in Panauti 30 km southeast of Kathmandu, he added.

Maoist guerrillas fired on an army patrol in east Nepal and gunned down a taxi driver as violence continued ahead of the country's first local election in seven years.



Nepalese election officials and a riot police officer discuss setting up of an outdoor polling station in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's Maoist rebels killed at least seven security force personnel in new clashes on the eve of today's local polls called by King Gyanendra as part of a pledge to restore democracy.

PHOTO: AFP

## Suicide attack on Afghan police post: 13 killed

AP, AFP, Kandahar

A suspected suicide bomber blew up a guard post outside police headquarters in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, killing 13 people and wounding 11, officials said.

Purported Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammed Yousaf claimed responsibility for the bombing on behalf of the hard-line militia, and threatened more attacks.

Ten of the dead and five of the wounded were police who were standing guard when the assault occurred, said Mamoon Khan, a doctor at Kandahar city's Mirwaise Hospital, which was treating the injured. The rest of the victims were civilians.

The interior ministry in Kabul confirmed the attack was a suicide attack, the latest in a series to rock the war-shattered nation.

"A suicide bomber wanted to get into the headquarters and while

police were searching for him he detonated the bomb which killed 13 people, among which seven are police and six civilians," ministry spokesman Yousuf Stanizai told AFP.

A senior police officer at the site of the blast, Jan Mohammed, said the bomb destroyed a guard post outside the police headquarters.

The attacker drove a "motorbike straight into the guard post and then there was an enormous explosion," he said.

## Tigers reject peace talks ahead of Geneva meet

Negotiations to focus only on salvaging truce

AFP, Colombo

Tiger rebels yesterday ruled out peace negotiations later this month with the Sri Lanka government and said only their faltering truce would be on the agenda as both sides prepared for an ice-breaking meeting in Geneva.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said two days of talks starting February 22 that will end a three-year deadlock in their troubled peace process will focus only on saving the troubled truce.

"The LTTE is not prepared to discuss modifications to the ceasefire or to push the ceasefire aside and waste time talking about a political solution (to the conflict)," the LTTE said in their official magazine "Vuduthalaippulikal".

President Mahinda Rajapakse came to power in November prom-

ising to drastically change the peace process and re-negotiate the truce arranged by peace broker Norway.

However, the Tigers said the truce concluded and put into effect from February 23, 2002 was a done deal and there could be no tinkering with it. The talks coincide with the third anniversary of the truce.

More than 60,000 people were killed in three decades of ethnic bloodshed until the truce started, but a new wave of violence erupted in December, putting pressure on the ceasefire.

"The only way to avoid war and create peaceful environment in the Tamil homeland is to implement the ceasefire agreement in full," the LTTE said. "The key to peace talks in the present context is the full implementation of the ceasefire."

"Confidence to proceed with

peace talks will be created only if the Mahinda government accepts this ground reality."

The rebels have accused the government of supporting a breakaway faction of the rebels to carry out attacks against the mainstream guerrillas.

At least 153 people were killed in a new wave of fighting after Rajapakse came to power and many of the killings have been blamed on the Tigers who in turn accuse "paramilitary units" of stirring up trouble.

The Colombo government, meanwhile, has begun training its peace team on negotiating skills, a spokesman for Rajapakse's office said.

He said the team headed by Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva were at a workshop and were also getting the views of a cross-section of Sri Lankan political parties.

## Violence escalates in cartoon crisis

AFP, Kabul

Violent protests against caricatures of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) escalated yesterday, with four demonstrators killed during an attack on Nato troops in Afghanistan, and a renewed assault against the Danish embassy in Tehran.

Nine people have been killed since protests erupted worldwide, seven in Afghanistan, and one each in Somalia and Lebanon.

Denmark, where the offending cartoons were first published, absorbed the brunt of Muslim anger, with attacks on diplomatic outposts, threats of economic boycotts, and the expulsion of Danish aid organizations from Chechnya.

Attempts by Western leaders, religious figures and international bodies to appease Muslims infuriated by what they see as the blasphemous portrayal of their prophet seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, as anti-Western protests

became more virulent. Fresh protests erupted Tuesday in Niger, where several thousands demonstrated in the capital Niamey, as well as in Iran.

Positions in the West hardened, too, with key officials expressing impatience with the continuing violence and demanding that foreign governments protect their embassies and consulates from rampaging mobs.

A few have suggested that some Muslim states -- Iran and Syria in particular -- have needlessly inflamed religious passions.

In what has become an act of editorial defiance, another European newspaper, the weekly Nacional in Croatia, published the offending cartoons on Tuesday.

The Afghan protesters were killed Tuesday when some 700 demonstrators attacked Norwegian Nato troops in the northwestern town of Maymana, lobbing grenades into their compound. Three Afghan protesters were killed Monday.

## Hamas to call on Fatah to join government

AFP, Cairo

The militant Palestinian Islamist group Hamas plans to formally ask its political rival Fatah to join a new government following its shock election win last month, an official said.

"We are going to sit down with them and officially propose that they take part in the government," senior Hamas official Ismail Haniya said after talks in Cairo late Monday.

"We are awaiting the official response from the Fatah leadership," Haniya was quoted as saying by the news agency MENA after a meeting with Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman.

## Maoist attacks kill 12 cops in Chattisgarh

REUTERS, Raipur

Maoist rebels killed 12 policemen on Monday in two separate attacks in Chattisgarh, police said.

The rebels set off a powerful landmine under the van of a patrol party, killing nine policemen, senior police officer M.W Ansari told Reuters.

Eight policemen were also wounded in the attack in Dantewada district, 480 km south of Raipur, he said.

In another incident, Maoists raided a police station in Jashpur district, about 450 km north of Raipur, and shot dead three policemen and wounded five, district police chief Purshotam Gautam said.

## Raj Babbar suspended, likely to join Congress

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Raj Babbar was suspended on Tuesday from the Samajwadi Party's parliamentary wing following his public diatribe against its high-profile general secretary Amar Singh.

Babbar, who had refused to quit the party on his own, welcomed the decision communicated to him by the party leader in the Lok Sabha, Ram Gopal Yadav.

"I am grateful to the Samajwadi Party for suspending me," said the Agra MP.