

Sea of shoes a grim memorial to Iraqi stampede victims

AFP, Baghdad

Thousands of sandals were littered across a bridge in Baghdad on Wednesday in a chilling reminder of the hundreds of men, women and children who lost their lives in a stampede among crowds of panicked Shia Muslim pilgrims.

A day of Shia religious ceremonies marking the death of a revered imam turned into Iraq's worst nightmare when throngs of pilgrims took fright after a deadly mortar attack on a shrine and rumours of suicide bombers in their midst.

A total of 647 people were drowned, trampled or crushed to death as they surged across Al-Aaimmah bridge near the Kadhimiyah mosque in northwest Baghdad, many of them falling into the Tigris river below.

"The crowd started to panic and women and children were being trampled underfoot," said Abdul Walid, 54, lying dazed on the floor of a nearby hospital.

"My son was on my shoulders, I don't know where he is now -- every-

body was suffocating to death so I eventually had to jump."

In the middle of the bridge, the waist-high concrete barriers designed to foil car bombers were stained with the blood of victims, mostly women and children, crushed to death in the panic.

Covered in bandages and nursing a broken leg, Walid tearfully recounted the tragic events which led to Iraq's deadliest single incident since the 2003 US-led invasion.

"Even before we heard the rumours, the crowds had come to a standstill -- there was no more room to move and people couldn't breathe," said Walid.

With the atmosphere already tense after four mortars had slammed into the crowds at the Kadhimiyah mosque, killing seven, the worshippers became terror-stricken by reports of suicide bombers and a much larger tragedy unfolded.

Ahmed Jasim, 28, said he was in the middle of the bridge as huge crowds converged from both ends, some leaving the mosque and

others making their way there.

"I was trying to pick up the children but was swept off my feet," said Jasim, whose shoulder and arm were fractured.

"I'm young and strong so I managed to force my way to the side and jumped into the Tigris -- another five minutes and I would have been crushed to death."

Several cases of criminal poisoning were also reported and witnesses said Shia militia members used loudspeakers to urge people not to drink water they had purchased near the scene.

Baghdad's hospitals were overwhelmed with the sheer numbers of casualties, with doctors losing count of the corpses passing through their wards.

"Most people are suffering from blunt trauma and the majority are women and children," said Dr Mazen Abdullilla, adding that medical services had been anticipating trouble at the event but were still struggling to cope.

"We have a shortage of painkillers and we still can't identify most of the bodies," Abdullilla said.

World leaders deplore Baghdad stampede

AFP, Tehran

Shia Iran on Wednesday led a worldwide chorus of horror and outrage over the deaths of almost 1,000 people in a stampede as they headed to a Shia shrine in Iraq, blaming "suspicious hands" bent on causing havoc in the country.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi expressed his country's "condolences and sympathy with the Iraqi people and government."

Syria, another neighbour of Iraq, expressed its "sorrow and sadness" over the incident that "cost the lives of hundreds of persons among the brotherly Iraqi people," a foreign ministry spokesman said.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan offered his condolences to families of the victims and to the Iraqi government.

In Washington a state department spokesman said the United States deeply regretted the tragic loss in human lives among the pilgrims.

Israel okays historic Egypt deployment

AFP, Cairo

Israel's parliament Wednesday approved an historic plan for Egyptian border guards to patrol along the Gaza border after the last Israeli troops leave the Palestinian territory next month.

The deal, which has taken months to negotiate, will see 750 lightly armed officers fan out to stop weapons being smuggled into the Gaza Strip, when all Israeli soldiers are recalled from the territory after a 38-year occupation.

MPs voted overwhelmingly in favour of the deployment after Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz delivered a passionate defence of the agreement with Cairo.

It will be first paramilitary deployment on the border since the 1967 Middle East war when Israel seized Gaza, then administered by Egypt, and the Sinai Peninsula.

Looting spirals in New Orleans

Thousands feared drowned, city mayor calls for all-out evacuation

AP, AFP, New Orleans

With thousands feared drowned in what could be America's deadliest natural disaster in a century, New Orleans' leaders all but surrendered the streets to floodwaters Wednesday and began turning out the lights on the ruined city perhaps for months.

US President George W. Bush yesterday vowed "zero tolerance" for looters and other profiteers from the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina and said he would send in more troops if necessary.

In an unexpected interview on ABC television, Bush also pledged maximum assistance for stricken areas of the US Gulf Coast, where hundreds were feared dead, and said Washington had not asked for any help from abroad.

Looting spiralled so out of control that Mayor Ray Nagin ordered virtually the entire police force to abandon search-and-rescue efforts and focus on the brazen packs of thieves who have turned increasingly hostile.

Late Wednesday, Tenet Healthcare Corp. asked Louisiana State Police and the US Coast Guard to help evacuate one of its hospitals in Gretna after a supply truck carrying food, water, medical supplies and pharmaceuticals was held up by gunmen.

"We have to close it down because we can no longer ensure the safety of our patients or our staff in that hospital," Tenet spokesman Steven Campanini said of the 203-bed Meadowcrest Hospital.

He said there were about 350 employees and between 125 to 150 patients inside the hospital, which is not flooded and is functioning.

Earlier, Nagin called for an all-out evacuation of the city's remaining residents. Asked how many people died, he said: "Minimum, hundreds. Most likely, thousands."

With most of the city under water, Army engineers struggled to plug New Orleans' breached levees with giant sandbags and concrete barriers, and authorities drew up plans to

clear out the tens of thousands of remaining people and practically abandon the below-sea-level city.

Nagin said there will be a "total evacuation of the city. We have to. The city will not be functional for two or three months." And he said people would not be allowed back into their homes for at least a month or two.

If the mayor's death-toll estimate holds true, it would make Katrina the worst natural disaster in the United States since at least the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, which have blamed for anywhere from about 500 to 6,000 deaths. Katrina would also be the nation's deadliest hurricane since 1900, when a storm in Galveston, Texas, killed between 6,000 and 12,000 people.

A slow exodus from the Superdome began Wednesday as the first of nearly 25,000 refugees left the miserable surroundings of the football stadium and were transported in buses to the Astrodome in Houston, 350 miles away. Conditions in the Superdome had become horrendous: There was no air conditioning, the toilets were backed up, and the stench was so bad that medical workers wore masks as they walked around.

In Mississippi, bodies are starting to pile up at the morgue in hard-hit Harrison County. Forty corpses have been brought to the morgue already, and officials expect the death toll in the county to climb well above 100.

Tempers were beginning to flare in the aftermath of the storm. Police said a man fatally shot his sister in the head over a bag of ice in Hattiesburg, Miss.



PHOTO: AFP Residents attempt to escape flood waters in New Orleans, Louisiana, in aftermath of Hurricane Katrina yesterday. With most of New Orleans submerged and thousands of people trapped by waters strewn with bodies, authorities also fought an outbreak of plundering by locals taking away food, appliances, jewels, clothes and even guns.

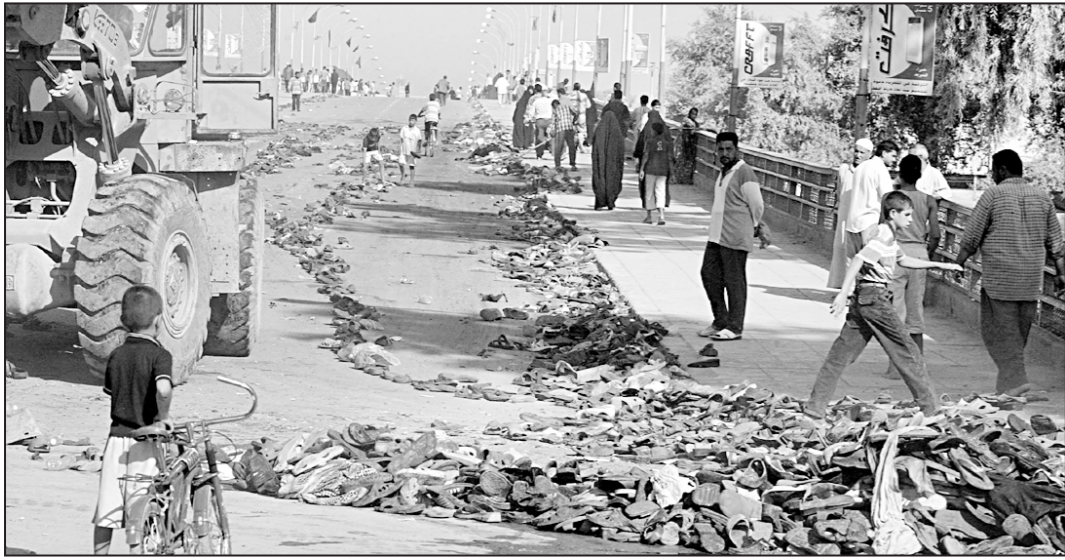


PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis look at the belongings of pilgrims lost during a stampede in Baghdad yesterday. Thousands of grieving Iraqis were searching for their loved ones as mass funerals were set to start, a day after the deadly stampede the previous day killed nearly 1,000 pilgrims who panicked because of rumours of suicide bombers in their midst.