

Twin attacks kill 30, wound local governor in Iraq

AFP, Ramadi

Blasts in central and western Iraq killed 30 people and wounded the Anbar provincial governor yesterday, the latest in a series of attacks in recent months against government targets in Iraq.

The worst violence struck the western city of Ramadi, where 23 people were killed and 30 were wounded in co-ordinated bombings, blamed on al-Qaeda amid collusion from the security forces, at the governor's offices in the centre of Anbar's provincial capital.

Governor Qassim Mohammed Abid was among the wounded, while senior security officials were also killed and injured. Around 20 cars were destroyed in the blasts.

The first attack struck near a security checkpoint at a junction leading to the governor offices in central Ramadi at around 9:30 am (0630 GMT).

About a half hour later, Abid and senior provincial security officials, who were in the offices, went outside to check on the situation.

"A suicide bomber wearing an army uniform ran towards the governor," police Captain Ahmed Mohammed al-Dulaimi told AFP.

"Some security people held him back, and he detonated himself."

The attack killed the compound's security chief Colonel Mahmud al-Fehdawi, as well as

wounding Abid and Anbar deputy police chief Colonel Abbas Mohammed al-Dulaimi.

Anbar Deputy Governor Hekmat Khalaf Zaidan said Abid had been flown to Baghdad for treatment, and added that the governor was in "mostly stable" condition.

He blamed al-Qaeda and the security forces for the attack, telling AFP: "I am astonished by the weakness of the security forces, which have been infiltrated."

"Those who carried out this terrorist attack were the intruders and extremists," he added, referring to al-Qaeda. "Those who want bad things for this country, collaborating with the infiltrated security forces."

The US military declined to confirm reports by Ramadi General Hospital that American troops took the provincial governor to a US-run hospital for treatment, when contacted by AFP.

No vehicles were allowed to enter or leave Ramadi in the aftermath of the attacks.

Wednesday's attacks were the latest coordinated bombings to hit government targets in Iraq in recent months, after similar blasts struck Baghdad in August, October and December, killing around 400 people.

The Baghdad attacks, which also wounded around 1,500 people, sparked public anger and spurred parliament to call in Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki for questioning.

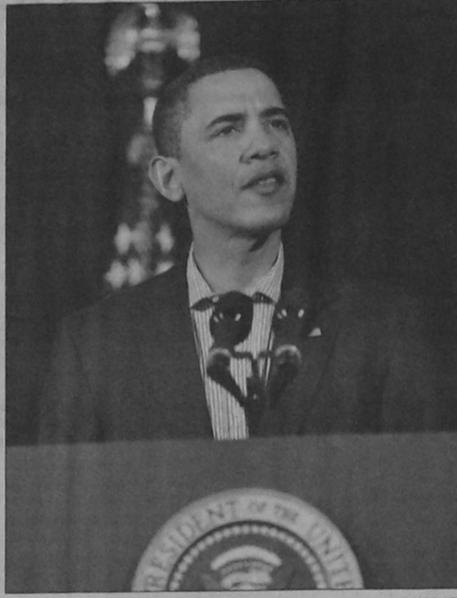


PHOTO: AFP
US President Barack Obama makes a statement at the Marine Base in Kaneohe, Hawaii, on Wednesday. Obama said that the US intelligence network had suffered a "systemic failure" ahead of the thwarted Christmas Day airliner attack and vowed to quickly fix the problems.

US rejects Russian missile shield concerns

BBC ONLINE

The United States has rejected fresh concerns raised by Moscow about its planned missile defence system.

The State Department statement came after Russian PM Vladimir Putin said the US plans were holding up a new nuclear disarmament treaty.

The statement said the two issues were completely separate, and discussions would continue separately.

Russia and the US are yet to find a successor to the Cold War-era Start I treaty, which expired on 5 December.

Analysts say Moscow wants a clause in the new treaty that would limit the scale of any US defence shield.

The US has shelved plans for missile defence stations in Central Europe, but intends to use a sea-based system.

The BBC's Imitiaz Tyab in Washington says it is clear from Putin's comments Russia still sees any missile shield as a threat - one it is now pledged to counter.

But the hardening of Russia's position must be frustrating for US President Barack Obama, our correspondent says, after the concessions he has made.

The US statement said that Washington and Moscow's joint position recognising the inter-relationship between defensive and offensive weapons systems had not changed.

"While the US has long agreed that there is a relationship between missile offence and defence, we believe the Start follow-on agreement is not the appropriate vehicle for addressing it," it said.

US congressmen press Afghanistan to delay election

AP, Kabul

US Congressmen said Tuesday they are urging Afghan President Hamid Karzai to delay the next parliamentary ballot until electoral reforms are in place or risk American financial support for his government.

Karzai insists the elections must be held in May despite widespread concerns about their credibility, the US legislators said.

The standoff comes in the wake of August's heavily disputed presidential election. The international community had hoped that election would affirm the government's credibility. Instead, massive fraud tarnished the Karzai government's reputation.

Obama says 'catastrophic' intelligence flaws led to plane attack

AFP, Honolulu

President Barack Obama lashed out at systemic intelligence failures, after learning a US security agency had prior information that might have averted the attempted attack on a US jet.

Obama was told Tuesday there had been warnings of possible Christmas holiday attacks, and information that the 23-year old Nigerian would-be bomber was a threat, but the data was not properly distributed throughout the US government.

US officials also disclosed that new intelligence suggested some "linkage" between the attacker and al-Qaeda, while US television networks showed the scorched underwear he used to conceal his potentially lethal bomb.

"A systemic failure has occurred and I consider that totally unacceptable," Obama said, breaking his Hawaii vacation for a second straight day as recriminations mounted over the botched December 25 attack on a Northwest airliner.

"There was a mix of human and systemic failures that contributed to this potential catastrophic breach of security," Obama said.

"We need to learn from this episode and act quickly to fix the flaws in our system because our security is at stake and lives are at stake."

Obama complained that the father of would-be bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab had warned US diplomats in Abuja that his son was an extremist threat -- yet the man was still able to board a US jet with explosives.

Afghan investigators say civilians killed by troops

Protesters burn Obama effigy

AP, AFP, Kabul/Jalalabad

The head of a presidential delegation investigating the deaths of 10 people in a village in eastern Afghanistan says the team of investigators has concluded that civilians were killed in an attack by foreign troops.

Asadullah Wafa said yesterday that among the victims discovered in a village house in the Narang district of Kunar province were eight schoolchildren between the ages of 12 and 14. Wafa is a senior adviser to President Hamid Karzai.

A Nato official said initial reports from troops involved in the fighting on Sunday indicated that the victims were insurgents all young males.

Wafa says the villagers are demanding that informants "who gave the wrong target to the Americans must be found and punished by a court."

Meanwhile, protesters took to the streets in Afghanistan on Wednesday, burning an effigy of the US president and shouting "death to Obama" to slam civilian deaths during Western military operations.

Hundreds of university students blocked main roads in Jalalabad, capital of eastern

Nangahar province, to protest the alleged deaths of 10 civilians, mostly school children, in a Western military operation on Saturday.

"The government must prevent such unilateral operations otherwise we will take guns instead of pens and fight against them (foreign forces)," students from the University of Nangahar's education faculty said in a statement.

Marching through the main street of Jalalabad, the students chanted "death to Obama" and "death to foreign forces", witnesses said.

The protesters torched a US flag and an effigy of US President Barack Obama in a public square in central Jalalabad, before dispersing.

"Our demonstration is against those foreigners who have come to our country," Safiullah Aminzai, a student organiser, told AFP.

"They have not brought democracy to Afghanistan but they are killing our religious scholars and children," he added.

Civilian deaths in the eight-year war to eradicate a Taliban-led insurgency are a sensitive issue for the Afghan public, and fan tensions between President Hamid Karzai and the 113,000 foreign troops supporting his government.

Court lets Palestinians use major Israeli highway

AP, Jerusalem

Israel's Supreme Court has ordered the military to allow Palestinians to travel on the part of a major highway that runs through the West Bank, handing Palestinians their biggest victory yet against Israel's practice of reserving some roads for Jews.

The West Bank section of Route 443 linking Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was closed in 2002 to Palestinians, after militants shot at Israeli vehicles on the highway and killed several motorists.

About half of the 20-mile (32-kilometer) highway runs through the West Bank. Palestinians living in villages along the route petitioned to have it reopened for them in 2007, as the Palestinian uprising against Israel wound down.

The court said in a summary of its ruling that the military does not have the authority to impose a permanent and sweeping limitation on Palestinian travel along the West Bank section of the road because that "in effect transforms the road into a route designed for 'internal' Israeli traffic alone."

It also said the closure of the road "does not benefit the local population, from whom lands were appropriated to build it." The judges ruled that security considerations cannot take precedence.

"It's a huge victory," said Melanie Takefman, spokeswoman for the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, which represented the Palestinians in their petition before the court.

Brazil's 'needle boy' out of danger

BBC ONLINE

Doctors in Brazil say a two-year-old boy who was pierced with at least 31 sewing needles is out of danger following a third successful operation.

Surgeons in Salvador de Bahia have decided to not remove the remaining few needles left in the boy for now.

The boy's stepfather Roberto Carlos Magalhaes, 30, has confessed to inserting the needles into the boy's body as part of a black magic ritual.

He said he did it as a means of taking revenge on his wife.

Doctor Roque Aras said the remaining needles were small and posed no significant threat, the Associated Press news agency reported.

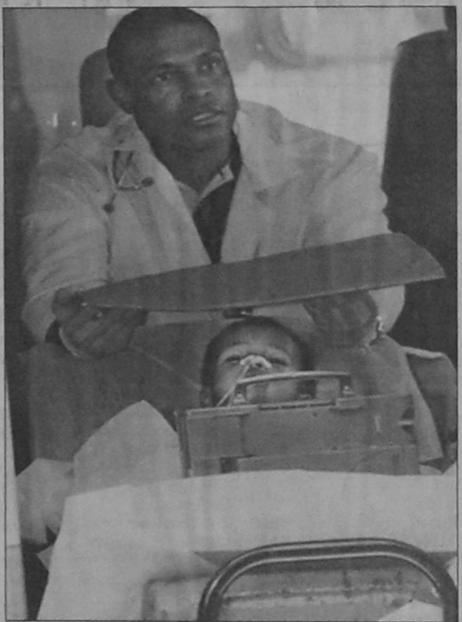


PHOTO: INTERNET

Report reveals Iran close to covert uranium smuggling

AP, Vienna

Iran is close to clinch a deal to clandestinely import 1,350 tons of purified uranium ore from Kazakhstan, according to an intelligence report obtained by The Associated Press. Diplomats said the assessment was heightening international concern about Tehran's nuclear activities.

Such a deal would be significant because, according to an independent research group, Tehran appears to be running out of the material, which it needs to feed its uranium enrichment program.

The report was drawn up by a member nation of the International Atomic Energy Agency and provided Tuesday to the AP on condition that the

country not be identified because of the confidential nature of the information.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said, "the transfer of any uranium yellowcake ... to Iran would constitute a clear violation of UNSC sanctions."

"We have been engaged with many of our international non-proliferation partners on Iran's illicit efforts to acquire new supplies of uranium over the past several years," he said.

A senior US official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was talking about confidential information said Washington was aware of the intelligence report, but he declined to discuss specifics.



PHOTO: AFP

Dozens of supporters of the Iranian opposition demonstrate on Wednesday in Paris. Maryam Rajavi, president of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the best-known Iranian opposition movement in exile, called for all those opposed to the Islamic regime in Tehran to unite in their efforts to overthrow clerical rule.

Obama moves to curb federal secrets

AP, Washington

More than 400 million pages of Cold War-era documents could be declassified as the federal government responds to President Barack Obama's order to rethink the way it protects the nation's secrets.

Among the changes announced Tuesday by Obama is a requirement that every record be released eventually and that federal agencies review how and why they mark documents classified or deny the release of historical records. A National Declassification Centre at the National Archives will be established to assist them and help clear a backlog of the Cold War records by Dec 31, 2013.

Obama also reversed a decision by President George W Bush that had allowed the intelligence community to block the release of a specific document, even if an interagency panel decided the information wouldn't harm national security.

Advocates for a more open government are cautiously cheering the move. "Everything will depend on implementation," said Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists. But the order "has tremendous potential to reduce the level of secrecy throughout the government."

In a memo to agency heads, Obama said he expects that the order will produce "measurable progress" toward greater openness in government while also protecting the nation's most important secrets.

"I will closely monitor the results," he promised.

The still-classified Cold War records would provide a wealth of data on US-Soviet relations, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the fall of the Berlin Wall, diplomacy and espionage. A Soviet spy ring in the Navy led by John Walker headlined 1985, which became known as "The Year of the Spy."

On his first day in office, Obama instructed federal agencies to be more responsive to requests for records under the Freedom of Information Act and he overturned an order by Bush that would have enabled former presidents and vice presidents to block release of sensitive records of their time in the White House.

The government spent more than \$8.21 billion last year to create and safeguard classified information, and \$43 million to declassify it, according to the Information Security Oversight Office, which oversees the government's security classification. The figures don't include data from the principal intelligence agencies, which is classified.

Secret mobile phone codes cracked

BBC ONLINE

A German computer scientist has published details of the secret code used to protect the conversations of more than 4bn mobile phone users.

Karsten Nohl, working with other experts, has spent the past five months cracking the algorithm used to encrypt calls using GSM technology.

GSM is the most popular standard for mobile networks around the world.

The work could allow anyone - including criminals - to eavesdrop on private phone conversations.

Nohl told the Chaos Communication Congress in Berlin that the work showed that GSM security was "inadequate".

"We are trying to inform people about this widespread vulnerability," he told BBC News.

"We hope to create some additional pressure and demand from customers for better encryption."

The GSM Association (GSM), which devised the algorithm and oversees development of the standard, said Nohl's work would

be "highly illegal" in the UK and many other countries.

"This isn't something that we take lightly at all," a spokeswoman said.

Nohl told the BBC that he had consulted with lawyers before publication and believed the work was "legal".

Nohl, working with a "few dozen" other people, claims to have published material that would crack the A5/1 algorithm, a 22-year-old code used by many carriers.

The code is designed to prevent phone calls from being intercepted by forcing mobile phones and base stations to rapidly change radio frequencies over a spectrum of 80 channels.

It is known to have a series of weaknesses with the first serious flaw exposed in 1994.

Nohl, who describes himself as an "offensive security researcher", announced his intention to crack the code at the Hacking at Random (HAR) conference in The Netherlands in August this year.

"Any cryptographic function is a one way street," he told BBC News. "You should not be able to decrypt without the secret key."

70 dead in clashes in Nigeria

AFP, Bauchi

At least 70 people died in violent clashes between security forces and Islamists in the northern Nigeria city of Bauchi, according to a hospital morgue body count yesterday.

The clashes erupted Monday between suspected members of an Islamist sect and police and military forces.

An AFP reporter who visited the morgue counted 42 bodies on the floor of the morgue, all with bullet or machete wounds. Another 25 bodies, mostly young people including many minors, had been placed in cold storage rooms at the morgue.

Three members of the security forces were also killed in the unrest on Monday.

"With the heat, these bodies need to be buried quickly as they will decompose rapidly," an employee told AFP at the morgue, where the room was being cooled by a single fan.

The radical Islamic sect Kala-Kato, also known by the name of Maitatsine, has been present in several states in northern Nigeria for decades.

Iran says more than 500 protesters arrested

AP, Tehran

Iran's police chief says more than 500 opposition protesters have been arrested since clashes on Sunday that left at least eight dead.

Gen Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam said yesterday the number of arrests may be higher because hardline Basij militiamen and intelligence agents may have apprehended more people on their own.

The clashes Sunday were the most violent since the aftermath of June's disputed presidential election.

The semi-official Fars news agency says the nephew of opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, one of those killed on Sunday, was buried Wednesday. Authorities had taken the body from the hospital earlier in the week, in what was seen as an attempt to prevent the funeral from turning into a protest.

Iranian hard-liners called a series of state-sponsored demonstrations on Wednesday in what they hoped would be a massive show of strength against the reformist movement, while the country's police chief threatened to show "no mercy" in crushing any new opposition rallies.

Wednesday's hardline protests, planned in Tehran and several other cities, were the latest official response to what has become the boldest challenge to the ruling system since the Islamic Revolution 30 years ago.

The government has been systematically arresting top opposition activists, including the sister of Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, limited the movement of a top opposition leader and heavily restricted media coverage in the wake of opposition rallies that left eight people dead early this week.

Iran's police chief, Gen Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam said authorities had exhausted their patience with the opposition and promised tough new action.

"In dealing with previous protests, police showed leniency but given that these currents are seeking to topple (the ruling system), there will be no mercy. We will take severe action," the official IRNA news agency quoted him as saying. "The era of tolerance is over. Anyone attending such rallies will be crushed."