

58 dead as car bombs sow Iraq mayhem

AFP, Baghdad

A series of five car bombs, three during prayers at Shiite mosques in Baghdad, and other attacks across Iraq killed 58 people yesterday, just days after the government said Al-Qaeda was on the run.

The violence wounded dozens more and underscored the unrest that continues to plague a nation whose politicians are struggling to form a government almost seven weeks after a general election seen crucial to its long-term stability.

Two car bombs in the impoverished district of Sadr City, one close to a political office of radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and another at a market in the area, killed 39 people and wounded 45, a security official said.

A third car bomb that exploded outside a Shiite mosque in Al-Ameen district in the east of the capital killed eight people and wounded 13, he said.

Earlier, at Abdel Hadi al-Chalabi mosque, named after the father of former deputy prime minister Ahmed Chalabi, a car bomb killed five

people and wounded 14, he added.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the deadly attacks in Baghdad, but the sequence of car bombings bore the hallmark of Al-Qaeda.

A total of 115 people were wounded in the five car bombs and two other attacks, the security official said.

The attacks in the capital followed early morning violence in Al-Anbar, a Sunni Arab province west of Baghdad, where an anti-terror judge's home was targeted in a sequence of house explosions that killed six people.

The judge, who recently sentenced three insurgents to 15 years in jail, escaped unharmed but two of his sons were injured.

Friday's violence came four days after Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was "bleeding" and its leaders "falling" after a joint Iraqi-US military operation on Sunday purportedly killed its top two leaders.

Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the political leader of AQI, and Abu Ayub al-Masri, an Egyptian militant and the insurgent group's self-styled "minister of war," died on Sunday, according to Iraqi and US officials.



Iraqis look at vehicles destroyed when car bombs exploded in the impoverished Baghdad district of Sadr City yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Kyrgyzstan's ousted president vows not to return

AP, MINSK, Belarus

Kyrgyzstan's ousted president said yesterday from exile in Belarus that he does not intend to return to his homeland as its leader, but said his resignation was invalid because he signed it under pressure.

Kurmanbek Bakiyev was deposed in an April 7 uprising that left 85 people dead in the Kyrgyz capital. He fled last week to neighbouring Kazakhstan and arrived in the Belarusian capital earlier this week.

Bakiyev said his resignation, signed before he left Kyrgyzstan, was not in force because interim officials reneged on a promise to protect his relatives.

G-20 officials convene for talks on global economy

AP, Washington

Finance officials from major countries believe the global economy is in far better shape than a year ago, but they are wrestling with a growing debt crisis in Greece that could unravel the hard-won gains.

The International Monetary Fund issued a statement yesterday stressing that the 186-nation lending agency was prepared to process Greece's request for emergency loans quickly.

Greece's call for help came as finance ministers and the heads of central banks from the Group of 20 major economies gathered at IMF headquarters for daylong talks. The G-20 is composed of the world's richest industrial countries and fast-growing developing nations such as China, Brazil, South Korea and Russia.

The United States was being represented by Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke. The talks yesterday were in advance of weekend meetings of key policymaking boards of the 186-nation IMF and its sister lending

institution, the World Bank.

All the discussions were likely to be overshadowed by Greece's debt problems, which have roiled global financial markets for weeks.

The Obama administration is hoping the G-20 will endorse a set of financial reforms that will complement the sweeping overhaul that President Barack Obama is seeking to get approved in Congress. That measure was scheduled for an initial showdown vote in the Senate on Monday.

The administration believes the United States, the world's largest economy, must show resolve in fixing the flaws exposed by the financial crisis or the momentum for global reform could falter. However, the G-20 nations were finding it tough to reach a consensus in a number of key areas, including a call by the IMF to boost taxes on financial institutions to pay for future bailouts.

Canadian Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said Thursday, "I'm not going to impose a tax on our banks that performed

well during the crisis."

In addition to overhauling rules governing banks' capital and liquidity standards and the regulation of exotic financial instruments such as derivatives, the finance officials were also scheduled to discuss efforts to assemble the IMF support package for Greece.

The G-20 talks were being held at a time when the global economy is showing signs of improvement. The IMF released a new outlook for the meetings that forecast growth this year of 4.2 percent, significantly better than the 0.6 percent drop in activity last year, the biggest plunge in the post-World War II period.

Strauss-Kahn, however, cautioned that the recovery was still "fragile," with wide discrepancies between different regions. China, now the world's third-largest economy, and other emerging Asian economic powers are surging ahead, followed by more moderate growth projected for this year in the United States and sluggish growth expected in much of Europe.

Thai protesters in new talks bid

BBC NEWS

Thailand's red-shirt protesters have issued a conditional offer of talks with the government, amid protests that have paralysed parts of Bangkok.

The red-shirts said that parliament had to be dissolved in one month - a change from their previous call for immediate dissolution and elections.

They also called for an investigation into recent violence and an end to harassment of protesters.

The red-shirts have been occupying parts of Bangkok for six weeks.

Their encampment, in Bangkok's shopping district, stretches south to the business district, where protesters have built large barricades. On Thursday, one person was killed and more than 80 injured in grenade attacks near their barricades.

'SHOW RESPONSIBILITY'

The conditional offer of talks was made by red-shirt leader Veera Musikapong.

"If the government says it will dissolve the House within 30 days, it is negotiable," he said.

"After the House dissolution, the government will have another 60 days to prepare for elections. In total it will be 90 days. But the government has to stop threatening people and show responsibility for what has happened."

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has already offered to hold elections by the end of 2010, a year ahead of schedule.

US envoy aims to renew Israel-Palestine talks

AP, Jerusalem

A White House envoy tried yesterday to get Israelis and Palestinians talking again after more than a year of deadlock, while confronting a second challenge -- navigating the rocky relations between Israel and the US.

Senator and veteran negotiator George Mitchell's most important meeting was yesterday afternoon with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has rejected Washington's calls for a halt to Israeli construction in east Jerusalem and has seen tensions with Israel's most important ally rise dramatically on his watch.

"I look forward to working with the Obama administration to move peace forward," Netanyahu told Mitchell at the beginning of the meeting. "We are serious about it, we know you are serious about it and we hope the Palestinians respond."

North Korea set to seize 5 SKorean assets

AP, SEOUL, South Korea

North Korea said yesterday it would confiscate five South Korean-owned properties at a jointly operated mountain resort in the isolated communist country, a development likely to worsen already-soured relations.

North Korea has been demanding that the South resume tours to the facility, which had been a key source of foreign currency earnings for the impoverished nation but were suspended after a North Korean soldier shot a South Korean tourist to death in 2008.

South Korea has refused to restart tours until its demands for a joint investigation into the death are carried out and measures to guarantee the safety of tourists are outlined.

Tensions between the two Koreas are already high after a South Korean navy ship sank last month, killing at least 39 people and leaving seven missing, amid suspicion that North Korea may have been responsible.



Indonesians stage a protest in front of the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta yesterday. Scores of Indonesians attended a protest calling for the Malaysian government to investigate the shooting of three Indonesian nationals accused of robbery by Malaysian policemen in Kuala Selangor on March 16. The banner reads, "Malaysia, Stop Killing".

PHOTO: AFP

Debt-ridden Greece seeks EU-IMF bailout

AFP, Athens

Greece went cap in hand to the EU and IMF yesterday, appealing for up to 45 billion euros of urgent aid at low rates this year in a grim turn for the eurozone now threatened by Greek contagion.

Prime Minister George Papandreou made a dramatic televised statement on the "national need", admitting defeat in his attempts to stand against huge debt and deficits, onslaughts on financial markets, and hoping that German reticence can be overcome.

The EU said immediately that it would give "rapid" and "efficient" treatment to the request, and did not expect any "obstacles", and International Monetary Fund head Dominique Strauss-Kahn said the fund would "move expeditiously."

Strauss-Kahn was to meet Greek Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou in Washington on Saturday where G20 finance ministers are meet over the weekend.

"The activation of the (EU-IMF aid) mechanism is a national need," Papandreou said.

"Our partners will do what is necessary to offer us a safe port to allow our boat to float again," he said. This would send a message to the markets that the European Union "is pro-

tecting the euro," he said, railing against the previous conservative government and speculators.

"Today the situation in the markets risks ... squandering not only the sacrifices made by Greeks but also the normal functioning of the economy due to the high interest rates," he said.

The interest rate on Greek debt dropped sharply in the first few minutes after the announcement but soon moved back up to 8.55 percent against a background of uncertainties about Greek data and procedures for a rescue to be enacted.

The Socialist prime minister, elected in October, accused the previous government of making "criminal choices."

His address also had the stature of an appeal to the nation which faces unprecedented austerity, just the day after the latest in a series of strikes against massive reforms under way.

Meanwhile, Greek Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou said EU-IMF aid to help Greece through its debt crisis should be available within a few days.

"Getting the aid cleared will take a few days," Papaconstantinou told a press conference shortly after Prime Minister George Papandreou formally asked the EU and IMF to activate a debt rescue package.

Iran open to UN nuclear monitoring

AP, Vienna

Iran has agreed to give the UN nuclear monitoring agency greater inspection and monitoring rights to a sensitive site where it is enriching uranium to higher levels, diplomats said yesterday.

The move -- indirectly confirmed by a senior Iranian envoy -- comes as Tehran mounts a diplomatic offensive meant to stave off new UN sanctions for its defiance of Security Council demands that it curb nuclear activities that could be used to make weapons.

Iran began enriching uranium to near 20 percent two months ago and says it will be turned into fuel rods for a research reactor that manufacture medical isotopes for cancer patients. It says it was forced to take this step because the big powers refused to meet it half way on a moribund plan that would have supplied the rods from abroad.

The International Atomic Energy Agency had pushed in vain for greater access to the enrichment operation since the start of the project, seeking to realign monitoring cameras already set up to oversee Iran's long-standing enrichment plant that is churning out much-lower-level uranium. It has also been asking for more frequent inspections, said the diplomats, who asked for anonymity because their information is confidential.

They said Iran agreed in principle earlier this month to give the IAEA the greater overview it sought, but the increased access and monitoring still had to be put in place.

Ali Asghar Soltanieh, the chief Iranian envoy to the IAEA, indirectly confirmed agreement, saying the two sides had "constructive talks" on the issue.

Belgian catholic bishop resigns

BBC NEWS

The bishop of the Belgian city of Bruges, Roger Vangheluwe, has resigned after admitting sexual abuse of a boy earlier in his career.

Bishop Vangheluwe said the abuse had happened when he was a simple priest and continued when he started as a bishop, a Vatican statement said.

The Vatican said Pope Benedict XVI had accepted the resignation.

The catholic church has come under severe pressure over child sexual abuse allegations emerging across the world.

Bishop Vangheluwe's decision to quit is the latest in a series of resignations to be offered or accepted.

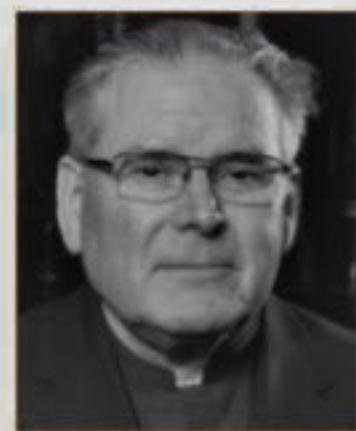
It was announced on Thursday that the German Bishop of Augsburg,

who had been accused of beating children at a catholic children's home in the 1970s and 1980s, had tendered his resignation.

Bishop Walter Mixa, who has not been accused of sexual abuse, has also been under pressure over allegations of financial irregularities at a children's school under his responsibility.

This week the Pope also accepted the resignation of Bishop James Moriarty of Kildare in Ireland and US Bishop John Favalora of Miami, both in connection with abuse cases.

The Pope said on Wednesday the Church was taking "action" over abuse against children by priests, in his most direct remarks to date on the recent allegations.



ABUSE SCAM

Lawsuit against pope 'without merit'

AFP, Vatican City

The Vatican's attorney yesterday dismissed as "completely without merit" a lawsuit against Pope Benedict XVI over sex abuse committed by a US priest.

"While legitimate lawsuits have been filed by abuse victims, this is not one of them," Jeffrey Lena said in a statement released by the Vatican.

The lawsuit also names at Vatican Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone -- the pope's right-hand man -- and Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the dean of the College of Cardinals and former secretary of state.

"Most of the complaint reshapes old theories already rejected by US courts," Lena said.

An alleged victim of Father Lawrence Murphy, a priest accused of molesting up to 200 boys at a school

for the deaf in Wisconsin, sued the Vatican and the pope on Thursday in an attempt to open secret files on internal investigations into sex abuse in the Roman Catholic Church.

"This suit demands further action by the Vatican and the removal of every single priest that has offended a single child and every single bishop and cardinal that has been complicit in those crimes," said Jeff Anderson, the victim's attorney.

The lawsuit is the fifth brought by Anderson on behalf of Murphy's victims, and he agrees it is broader than a 2002 action against the Vatican -- which is currently before the Supreme Court to determine whether the Holy See can be sued in a US court.

The German magazine Die Zeit said earlier this month that Bertone bore the main responsibility for inaction in the Murphy scandal.



Polanski extradition moves closer

BBC NEWS

A US court has rejected a bid by film director Roman Polanski to be sentenced in absentia for a child sex case.

The move by the California Second District Court of Appeal clears the way for Polanski, now 76, to be extradited from Switzerland to the US.

Polanski has been under house arrest in Switzerland since September facing a US arrest warrant over his conviction for unlawful sex with a 13-year-old girl.

He left the US in 1978 before he could be sentenced and has never returned.