

Fifteen killed in Baghdad bank siege

AFP, Baghdad

Suicide bombers and gunmen wearing military uniforms killed 15 people and took hostages yesterday in a daring raid on the Iraq Central Bank in Baghdad, triggering an ongoing siege with security forces.

The violence began at around 2:50 pm (11:50 GMT) when a suicide attacker wearing an army captain's uniform detonated his payload near the building, causing multiple casualties, a high-ranking defence ministry official said.

The attackers took control of the building as a total of eight explosions sounded throughout the area in less than an hour amid exchanges of gunfire and as army helicopters circled overhead.

The gunmen were continuing to occupy the building and the attackers had posted snipers on the roof of the bank in an attempt to deter police and soldiers from wresting back control, according to the defence official.

Most of those killed were bank workers, with a further 43 people wounded, and many other employees are being held captive inside, said an interior ministry official who gave the toll.

Major General Qassim Atta, a spokesman for the security forces in Baghdad, said soldiers and police were "besieging" the attackers whom he described as "a terrorist group."

He said it was unclear if they had intended to rob the bank, target its employees and take hostages, or destroy the building.

Government figures showed that 337 people were killed in violence across Iraq in May, the fourth time this year that the overall death toll has been higher when compared with the same month of 2009.

The audacious attack came one day before the reopening of the conflict-torn nation's parliament, the country's second democratic grouping since the US-led invasion that ousted dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.



Smoke billows from the scene of one of eight explosions that rocked the Iraqi capital Baghdad yesterday within minutes of each other, killing at least two people, according to an interior ministry official.

Arab chief condemns Gaza siege on landmark visit

REUTERS, Gaza

Arab League chief Amr Moussa visited the Gaza Strip yesterday, the highest Arab official to do so since its seizure by Hamas Islamists in 2007, and called for an end to Israel's blockade of the Palestinian territory.

Moussa crossed into the enclave from Egypt, two weeks after Israel's deadly interception of a Gaza aid flotilla.

"This blockade... must be lifted and must be broken and the Arab League decision is very clear in this regard," Moussa said.

Egypt had kept its Gaza border largely closed, bolstering Israel's embargo, since Hamas, which won a 2006 election, seized sole control of the Gaza Strip in a war with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction three years ago.

But Cairo reopened its Rafah crossing with the territory after Israeli marines killed nine pro-Palestinian Turkish activists during a raid on a Turkish-flagged vessel in the aid convoy on May 31.

Palestinian and Arab League officials said Moussa's visit was also aimed at giving momentum to reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah that Egypt has sponsored but which have failed to bridge deep mistrust between the two rivals.

Kim Jong-Il's son could face ruinous inheritance

NEWS ANALYSIS

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's ailing leader Kim Jong-Il appears to be paving the way for his youngest son Jong-Un to take over in what would be the hardline communist state's second dynastic succession.

But barring a dramatic change of course, Jong-Un seems set to inherit a hungry, impoverished and sanctions-hit nation still locked in confrontation with the West over its nuclear ambitions.

Some analysts say the current regime is becoming increasingly unpredictable as Kim, 68, battles health problems and the economy crumbles.

A reshuffle announced June 8 saw Kim's brother-in-law Jang Song-Thaek, who acts as mentor to the young Jong-Un, appointed as a vice-chairman of the top decision-making body the National Defence Commission.

The move shows the North "is formalising and finalising its planned father-to-son power transfer", said Paik Haksoon of Seoul's Sejong Institute think-tank.

It was unclear when Kim would step down. But Paik predicted the son would be formally designated as eventual successor in 2012, the year the country has set for becoming a "great, powerful and prosperous" nation.

The North suffered famine in the mid-1990s which killed hundreds of thousands of people and it still grapples with severe food shortages. The UN children's fund estimates one third of children are stunted by malnutrition.

"North Korea is now in a dire situation, with its economy almost bankrupt and resources depleted," said Korea University professor Yoo Ho-Yeol.

"Sanctions and failed policies have aggravated food shortages and difficulties in other sectors," Yoo told AFP.

"It has no other option but to introduce Chinese-style (economic) reforms for survival but its leadership is afraid of doing so, as seen in its failed currency reform."

The state food distribution system collapsed during the famine and North Koreans began having to use their wits to stay alive. Free markets sprang up and were condoned for a time.

Since 2005, the regime has been reasserting its grip on the economy, with controls or outright bans on free markets.

'Shoot to kill' ordered as Kyrgyz clashes spread

Death toll rises to 97

AFP, Bishkek

Deadly ethnic clashes across the south of Kyrgyzstan raged for a third day yesterday, as the embattled interim government ordered police to shoot to kill gangs of marauders terrorizing the population.

At least 97 people have been killed and more than 1,200 wounded, the health ministry said on Sunday. The previous death toll stood at 86.

Since Thursday evening, "97 people have died in the Osh and Jalalabad regions" during clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek groups, the ministry said.

Another 1,247 had been wounded in the violence, according to their latest figures.

On Saturday, Kyrgyzstan ordered the partial mobilisation of the army after nearly three days of deadly clashes and gave security forces shoot-to-kill orders against any groups using firearms.

Interim President Roza Otunbayeva earlier appealed to Moscow to intervene militarily, but with Moscow declining to send troops and the violence showing no signs of abating in the Central Asian state, calls from foreign leaders and aid groups to end the brutal clashes have gained urgency.

The government decreed late Saturday that lethal force would now be authorised to protect civilians.

"If we do not take opportune and effective measures the unrest could

become much more serious and descend into a regional conflict," it said in the decree.

It tightened a state of emergency to a 24-hour curfew in the southern Osh region, where the violence erupted Thursday when battles between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks flared into running street battles across Osh city.

Authorities also extended the emergency rule Sunday across the country's entire southern Jalalabad region as heavy fighting spread there from neighbouring Osh, leaving at least 11 people dead, officials said.

Panicked residents described ongoing violence in the region, where the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned of a humanitarian crisis.

"The authorities are not doing anything to stabilize the situation.... We are not even able to collect bodies from the streets," Ruslan, an Osh resident who preferred not to give his surname, said by telephone.

"The truth and the enormity of the tragedy cannot be hidden. The city centre is under the control of bandits."

In Jalalabad, where the worst of the fighting now appears to be centred, local resident Sergei Kim, described chaotic scenes with gun battles throughout the city.

"There are shoot-outs going on in the streets and many people. A gang is moving in the direction of the university," he said.

Smoke hung over the city as fires raged

in several buildings, another local resident, journalist Zhalil Saparov, told AFP.

"There is a veil of smoke covering the whole city," he said.

Rights group Amnesty International called on authorities to protect citizens "of Uzbek origin who have been targeted during the violence".

It urged neighbouring Uzbekistan to take in refugees, saying between 2,000-6,000 refugees had fled to the border, desperate to escape the violence.

"Things are getting worse and worse by the hour," said Severine Chappaz, the deputy head of the ICRC mission in Kyrgyzstan.

"Tens of thousands of people are fleeing the fighting and looting and heading towards the Kyrgyz border with Uzbekistan."

An AFP reporter witnessed hundreds of ethnic Uzbek women and children hoping to be allowed in Uzbekistan at one border post.

Uzbekistan has voiced "extreme alarm" over the situation, calling it an organized bid to inflame ethnic tensions, but has not said whether it will accept refugees.

The European Commission Saturday announced it was sending a humanitarian expert to evaluate the situation, while Moscow pledged swift medical aid.

The provisional government has so far failed to impose order in the Central Asian state since coming to power during deadly riots that ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April.

BP criticism not about nationality, says Obama

US tells BP to devise better leak response in 48 hours

BBC ONLINE, REUTERS, Boston

Barack Obama has told Prime Minister David Cameron that criticism of BP over the Gulf of Mexico oil spill has "nothing to do with national identity".

In a 30-minute phone call, the US president said he recognised BP was a multinational company and he had no interest in undermining its value.

Obama's blunt criticism of BP over the spill has prompted accusations of "anti-British" language.

Cameron will visit the US as prime minister for the first time on 20 July.

During the telephone conversation on Saturday, Cameron expressed his sadness at the environmental damage from the oil leak that began on 20 April.

A Downing Street statement said the leaders had "agreed that BP should continue - as they have pledged - to work intensively to ensure that all sensible and reasonable steps are taken as rapidly as practicable to deal with the consequences of this catastrophe".

President Obama's criticisms of BP - and in particular its chief executive Tony Hayward - have been consistently blunt.

Meanwhile, a top US Coast Guard official has told BP Plc the company's plans to contain the gushing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico do not go far enough or contain enough back-up measures.

"BP must identify in the next 48 hours additional leak containment capacity that could be operationalized and expedited," Coast Guard Rear Admiral James Watson said in a letter to BP dated June 11.

Watson, the federal on-scene coordinator for spill response, noted estimates of the amount of oil leaking from BP's damaged well have been raised sharply.

Telecom law

FROM PAGE 1
harmony appears on the web, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) would ask the telecom service provider to remove it before taking any tough action.

But if the directive is not complied with, stern actions would be taken against individuals or organisations responsible, it said.

The bill proposed that the authority to issue licences, and make financial and policy decisions should rest with the government, not the BTRC, which now enjoys the privileges exclusively.

The BTRC would issue licences on prior approval of the government, it said.

Another proposal was made for awarding punishment to telecom operators for wrongdoings without giving them scope for challenging the decision on cancellation and suspension of licences.

The bill placed by the post and telecommunications minister suggested a fine up to Tk 300 crore for violation of the provisions of the law.

It contains a few clauses outlining the means to bring the VoIP (voice over internet protocol) business under a legal framework.

The bill suggesting scaling

up the punishment up to five years' imprisonment from six months or a maximum fine of Tk 5 crore from Tk 50,000 or both for posting obscene, indecent, threatening and grossly insulting message through use of telecom or radio apparatus.

Once the bill gets through, a "Social Obligation Fund" will be raised for expansion of telecom network in remote areas.

In defence of the proposed changes, Post and Telecommunications Minister Raziuddin Ahmed Razu said the amendments are required to materialise the vision to have a "digital Bangladesh".

In a brief statement tagged with a copy of the bill, he said the bill contains a provision for legalising VoIP business and issuing VoIP call termination operator licences to generate employment.

The minister said if the bill gets through, it would help curb illegal use of telecom technology and increase revenue income.

The bill was sent to the parliamentary standing committee on post and telecommunications ministry for scrutiny. The committee was asked to turn in a report in the House within 15 days.



Chinese museum workers prepare to pack a set of Tibetan Buddhist relics for shipment to Taiwan for an exhibition at the Taipei's National Palace Museum, in Beijing on Saturday. The National Palace Museum boasts more than 655,000 artefacts spanning 7,000 years from the Neolithic period to the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 that were removed from a Beijing museum in the 1930s to prevent them falling into the hands of invading Japanese troops and were taken to Taiwan by the Nationalists as they fled communist forces on the mainland.

Slovakia's centre-right opposition 'wins' polls

BBC ONLINE

A coalition of centre-right opposition parties in Slovakia has won enough seats to unseat the current government.

With almost all votes counted, Prime Minister Robert Fico's leftist Smer party has just over 35%, enough to gain 63 seats in the 150-seat parliament.

But three conservative parties and an ethnic Hungarian party are set to win 78 seats.

However, Fico said that he would still try to form a government, as leader of the largest single party.

Referring to his party's 63 seats, he said: "This is a number that gives us the right to accept a mandate from the president to form a cabinet. We are ready for that."

Growing public debt and a political fund-raising scandal affected Smer's popularity, analysts say.

Slovakia's worsening ties with Hungary also dominated the election campaign.

Turnout in the election was 58.7%. Six parties gained enough votes to cross the 5% threshold required to take seats in parliament.