

Spate of attacks on Shias kill 72 in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A wave of apparently coordinated bombings and shootings rocked Iraq during a major Shia religious commemoration yesterday, killing at least 72 people and wounding more than 250, many of them pilgrims.

The attacks, which came as pilgrims flocked to a shrine to mark the anniversary of the death of Imam Musa Kadhim, a revered imam in Shia Islam, were the deadliest in Iraq since August 15, 2011 when 74 people were killed.

The targeting of Shia pilgrims was a stark reminder of Sunni-Shia violence which tore Iraq apart in 2006-2007 and was condemned by parliament speaker Osama al-Nujaifi, who termed it an attempt "to provoke sectarian strife."

Baghdad was hit by 10 bomb attacks and two shootings that killed at least 28 people and wounded dozens more, according to an interior ministry official and a medic.

Another car bomb on the outskirts of Kadhimiyah, which an interior ministry official and a medic said killed seven people, left a hole two metres (yards) deep in a street, dam-

aged cars and destroyed a number of make-shift houses.

Coordinated attacks took place across other centres, including in the central city of Hilla, where a police captain and doctor Ali al-Khafaji at the main hospital said two car bombs killed 20 people and wounded 51 others.

Ten people, meanwhile, were killed in a wave of attacks in and around Baquba, north of Baghdad, security and medical officials said.

In the northern city of Kirkuk, three car bombs killed two people and wounded at least 17 more, the interior ministry official and doctor Nabil Hamdi Mushnaq of Kirkuk hospital said.

In other incidents, five people were killed and 30 wounded in two car bombs in Balad, north of Baghdad, including one which targeted the local headquarters of the Shiite endowment.

Yesterday's attacks come during a political row that has seen opponents of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki mounting an attempt to oust him, but so far failing due to a lack of votes.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, right, speaks with Indian Minister of External Affairs S.M. Krishna during the US-India Strategic Dialogue at the State Department in Washington, DC yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Yemen army's assault on Qaeda kills 30

AFP, Aden

Two raids on al-Qaeda in Yemen, at least one of them reportedly by a US drone, killed 30 people yesterday, an official said, as the jihadists came under new pressure a day after losing two key strongholds.

The raids targeted al-Qaeda fighters fleeing the southern region of Abyan where the army scored its first major victory against the jihadists on Tuesday, retaking the town of Jaar and the provincial capital Zinjibar, more than a year after they fell under militant control.

Yemeni forces launched an offensive on May 12 aimed at reclaiming towns and cities lost to al-Qaeda during the past year. A total of 515 people have died in the campaign, according to an AFP tally.

INDIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Pranab Congress' first choice

Mamata, Yadav reject choice, put forward own priorities

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Ending days of suspense, Congress president Sonia Gandhi today made it clear that finance minister Pranab Mukherjee was her first choice for presidency and Vice-President Hamid Ansari was also in the reckoning.

Sonia revealed her mind to Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee who met her here yesterday.

The Indian Presidential poll is scheduled for July 19.

However, Mamata told mediapersons that she gave no commitment of her party Trinamool Congress' support to either Mukherjee or Ansari, saying she would convey her stand after discussions with Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav and her own party.

"We had detailed discussions.... Sonijai told me that she had held meetings with two-four allies and her first choice (for Presidentship) is Pranab Mukherjee and second choice is Hamid Ansari," Banerjee told reporters after her 30-minute meeting with the



Congress President.

But after the meeting with Mulayam Singh Yadav, Mamata Banerjee, whose party is a key constituent of India's ruling alliance UPA, rejected congress' first choice.

In addition, both Mamata and Yadav revealed their choices for the top post.

They told reporters that they have short listed three candidates in order of priority 1. APJ Abdul Kalam, former president of India, 2. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and 3. former parlia-

ment speaker Somnath Chatterjee.

The Trinamool chief and Yadav are apparently coordinating their efforts to extract financial packages for West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Mulayam's son Akhilesh Yadav is Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister.

However, prior to her meeting with the Congress chief, Banerjee insisted that her demand for a three-year moratorium on payment of interest on loans taken from federal government was not linked to her party's support to the UPA nominee in the Presidential polls.

Banerjee said West Bengal was in a precarious situation financially due to the policies pursued by the previous Left Front government and hence she had sought a moratorium on payment of interest for three years.

She said the demand for moratorium was a year-old and not linked to the Presidential polls.

"Whatever the state earns goes in repayment of interest. It is a very precarious situation. Please don't link it with Presidential elections," Banerjee said.

Russia presses Iran ahead of nuclear talks

AFP, Tehran

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov flew into Iran yesterday for a brief visit expected to exert international pressure on Tehran over its disputed nuclear programme, and to discuss the conflict in Syria.

The trip comes ahead of a new round of negotiations between Iran and the major powers that is to be held in Moscow next Monday and Tuesday.

The Russian foreign ministry said Lavrov would devote "particular attention to preparations" for the Moscow meeting on the nuclear talks but gave no other details.

Lavrov was to meet his Iranian counterpart, Ali Akbar Salehi, and Iran's lead negotiator in the talks, Saeed Jalili, according to officials.

'Good progress' in global nuclear safety: IAEA

AFP, Singapore

The UN atomic watchdog yesterday said "good progress" was being made in enhancing global nuclear safety, almost a year after implementing an action plan in the wake of the Fukushima disaster.

The programme implemented by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) last September involves fresh assessments of the world's 440 nuclear plants and emergency measures, as well as more voluntary "peer review" visits by foreign experts.

"I believe that nuclear power plants have already become safer as a result of the measures taken as outlined in the action plan on nuclear safety," said Denis Flory, the IAEA's deputy director general for nuclear safety and security.

Japan was struck on March 11, 2011 by one of the strongest earthquakes in modern times which sent a tsunami crashing into the

Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee as radioactivity spewed into the air.

The nuclear crisis did not directly claim any lives, although more than 19,000 people were killed by the force of the tsunami in Japan's worst post-World War II disaster.

In his speech in Singapore, Flory also said the IAEA was working with countries to boost rapid response capabilities during nuclear disasters.

One of the options being explored is for national teams trained to deal with nuclear disasters to be made internationally available through the agency's Response and Assistance Network, he added.

Flory also cautioned countries embarking on new nuclear projects to exercise "the highest level of transparency and openness in communication" in order to allay public concerns over safety issues.



Europe, Japan back Obama's re-election bid

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama would cruise to reelection in November if Europeans and Japanese could vote, but his popularity is slipping in China and Muslim nations, according to a poll out yesterday.

A month-long, 21-nation survey by the Pew Research Center found approval of Obama has sharply declined since he took office in early 2009, and US economic clout is increasingly seen to be waning, even among key US allies in Europe.

But despite some general disappointment with the president's policies, Europeans fervently support his re-election, including in France, where 92 percent of respondents want to see a second Obama term.

Nearly nine in 10 Germans also favor his reelection, along with 73 percent of British respondents.

Such numbers would be a godsend for Obama domestically, where he is locked in a neck-and-neck battle with Republican challenger Mitt Romney. A recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll put Obama ahead 47-43 percent against his rival.

In China, just 31 percent of Chinese want Obama reelected, compared with 39 percent who do not. And in Russia, a country with which the Obama administration pledged to "reset" troubled relations, 25 percent are in favor of his re-election and 27 percent opposed.

Syria now in civil war

Says UN observer chief; Russia accuses US of aiding rebels

AFP, Damascus

Syria is now in a full-scale civil war, UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous said, as the United States accused Russia of supplying the regime of Bashar al-Assad with attack helicopters.

The UN peacekeeping chief told reporters that there was an escalation in violence in Syria as Assad's forces seek to regain control of "large chunks of territory" they had lost to the opposition.

Asked whether he believed Syria is in a civil war, he said: "Yes I think we can say that. I think there is a massive increase in the level of violence, so massive indeed that in a way it indicates some change of nature."

His comments marked the first time a UN official has openly spoken of civil war in Syria.

But the Syrian government yesterday said it is fighting "terrorists" and not a civil war, as rebels pulled out of a besieged enclave where an eight-day bombardment had raised fears for

trapped civilians.

Syria opposition also rejected the civil war claim by the UN official.

Expressing surprise at an assessment by UN peacekeeping chief that a sharp escalation in violence had changed the nature of the 15-month conflict, the foreign ministry said UN officials should remain "neutral, objective and precise".

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday accused Washington of giving arms to the rebels after his US counterpart Hillary Clinton charged that Moscow was supplying President Bashar al-Assad's regime with attack helicopters.

The raging violence has stepped up the call for outside intervention in Syria.

But Nato chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen yesterday said that military intervention like that carried out by the Western alliance in Libya last year was "not the right path".

On the ground, at least 15 people were killed as troops and rebels clashed across the country, said the Syrian

Observatory for Human Rights.

State media said government forces overran Al-Haffe, a day after UN observers came under fire trying to reach the town after the UN and opposition activists expressed fears of a massacre.

"Security and calm were restored in the area of Al-Haffe which was cleansed after armed terrorist groups assaulted citizens and vandalised and burned a number of public and private properties," SANA said.

Meanwhile, Stepping up the pressure on the Assad regime, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said he would contact allies to draw up tougher sanctions against his top brass, as he too labelled the conflict a "civil war."

He added that France plans to ask the UN Security Council to make UN-Arab envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan "obligatory" under the UN Charter's Chapter VII, which allows measures to be imposed on countries under penalty of sanctions or the use of force.

Nations at odds on key issues

BBC ONLINE

The final round of negotiations leading up to next week's Rio+20 summit has begun yesterday with countries very much at odds on key issues.

The draft agreement would improve energy, water and food security in poorer countries, phase out fossil fuel subsidies and boost ocean protection.

But with three days of negotiations left, only 20% has been agreed.

The summit is widely seen as a crucial opportunity for leaders to put the global economy on a more sustainable footing.

The draft agreement - titled The Future We Want - is riddled with deletions, many instigated by the US and many by the G77/China bloc of developing nations. Russia, Japan, the EU and other parties have also objected to key clauses.

The draft has been criticised in some quarters as being too lenient on businesses, especially major banks and commodity corporations.

There is also a row over the proposed



sustainable development goals (SDGs), which would seek to relieve poverty and improve health, education and jobs in developing countries, but along environmentally and socially sustainable lines.

Some aid agencies fear this will result in a watering down of the key commitment to helping people out of poverty, contained in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

There is also a lack of agreement on whether the SDGs should commit rich countries to curbing their consumption of natural resources, in order to leave more for the poor.

In a widely-circulated editorial, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who now runs Green Cross International, contrasted the "optimism and hope" of the Rio Earth Summit 20 years ago with the "cynicism and despair" surrounding this one.

"I feel bitter when I look at the cavernous gulf between rich and poor, the irresponsibility that caused the global financial crisis, the weak and divided responses to climate change, and the failure to achieve the MDGs," he said.

"The opportunity to build a safer, fairer and more united world has been largely squandered."

The eight rounds of formal and informal preparatory talks since the beginning of the year have been bedevilled by problems of substance as well as of process.

There is widespread disappointment among activists that scores of leaders including the UK's David Cameron, Germany's Angela Merkel and US President Barack Obama have chosen to stay away.



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INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY, BANGLADESH (IUB DHAKA)

Search for Pro Vice-Chancellor

The Education, Science, Technology and Cultural Development Trust (ESTCDT), a non-profit Trust and the founder of Independent University, Bangladesh, Dhaka (IUB, Dhaka) is conducting a Search under the Private University Act, 2010 for appointment of :

Pro Vice-Chancellor

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