

Bombers Batter Baquba on Eve of Election

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Residents of volatile city fear poll turnout will be affected after bloody attacks. Suicide bombers have brought carnage and chaos to the Iraqi town of Baquba, days before a nationwide parliamentary election.

More than 30 people were killed and at least 50 injured in three coordinated attacks on March 3.

Insurgents driving cars packed with explosives caused the first two blasts, targeting a local government building and a busy crossroads.

The third attack was the bloodiest and took place in a hospital treating casualties from the previous explosions.

The bomber was reportedly wearing a police uniform and arrived at the hospital in an ambulance after posing as an injured person.

The attacks appear to confirm fears that militants are seeking to sabotage a landmark election due to take place on March 7.

A statement attributed to al-Qaeda in Iraq, a largely homegrown insurgent group, warning of attacks in the run-up to the vote, was released in February.

The first bomb was detonated at 9.30 am local time, and the second one followed within the hour.

Kamel al-Zubadi, a civil servant in his twenties, said he was knocked unconscious by the bomb at the crossroads and woke up in hospital. "I heard an explosion and saw smoke in the sky. There was fire all around me," he said.

He added that Baquba residents had been worried about unrest during the election period and were stocking up on essential supplies from the market when the bombs hit.

Hussein Basim, a policeman in his late twenties, said he was injured at the hospital as he helped ambulance workers bring the wounded for treatment.

"The suicide bomber blew himself up near the bodyguards of the police chief, who was visiting the hospital," he said.

"The doctors have told me I might lose one of my legs because of my injuries. I have seven children. Who

will support them?”

Survivors have criticised the authorities for failing to protect them.

“I was driving to work when a car blew up nearby. As I was taking one of the wounded to hospital in my car, another explosion smashed my windows,” Yasir Yahya, a middle-aged man wounded in the attacks, said.

“If such explosions can take place while the streets are full of security forces, how do they expect people to visit the ballot box in three days’ time?” he asked.

“I believe mistrust of the security forces will reduce participation in the election.”

Sultan Mohammed, a trader in his early twenties whose brother was hurt in the blasts, also felt turnout would be affected by the violence.

“The government failed to maintain security. People have lost faith in the security forces,” he said.

Senior officials insisted that preparations for the election were adequate and the bombers would not keep voters away.

“The security forces are ready to protect all the polling stations in the province. A massive plan has prepared, involving 22,000 policemen,” Major Galib al-Jibori, a police spokesman, said.

He added that United States troops were available to offer extra protection.

Baquba is the capital of Diyala, a violent province north-east of Baghdad with a volatile mix of Sunni and Shia Arabs and minority Kurds.

“The sons of the province will not be deterred from taking part in the election, despite this attack,” Abdul Nasir al-Mahdawi, the governor of Diyala, said. “Terrorism is in its last breath in Diyala.”

A curfew has been in place in Baquba since the blasts, with private vehicles banned from many of the city’s streets.

Police said they had found a further two bombs during a search of the streets. They said eight people had so far been arrested on suspicion of involvement in the attacks.

Ali Mohammed is an IWPR-trained reporter in Baquba.

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