

## **Chaos Hits Formerly Quiet City**

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Fear reigns in Hilla – a city that used to be an island of calm in the Shia south - after a round of fighting, looting and mass jailbreaks.

The gates of Hilla's central prison – a massive complex surrounded by concrete barriers and barbed wire – were left blown wide open. All the prisoners had vanished. Inside were only children, running back and forth carrying off toilets, windows and other loot.

Even the streets of Hilla - a mainly Shia city about 100 kilometres south of Baghdad, and once known as a centre of calm in turbulent Iraq - had been emptied by the prevailing sense of fear.

Residents took refuge indoors after gunmen - said to be Mahdi Army militia loyal to radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr - attacked police facilities across the city and freed all the detainees held there.

The August 20 battle indicated how three weeks of fighting between Sadr's militia and the Coalition and Iraqi government forces spread instability from the holy city of Najaf to other areas across southern Iraq by the end of August.

Outside the police station, a sprinkling of small- and large-calibre ammunition casings remained from the battle – one of several attacks that the Mahdi Army launched across Iraq in an apparent attempt to spread their uprising.

"We received information that demonstrators from many towns outside Hilla would be arriving, but we did not anticipate what would happen," said police officer Mohammed Hussein. "Hundreds of demonstrators came in the morning and headed for the mosque. They brought out heavy weapons such as rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and PKS and RPK machine-guns."

The fighters launched a full-out attack on the police station.

Despite air support provided by two United States planes and a column of Polish troops which arrived at midnight, the battle lasted until seven the following morning.

"We were exposed to missiles, rockets, and grenades. We had nine people martyred [killed]. It was a very painful day for us," said policeman Ameer Hassan Aboud.

Law enforcement officers then faced the long task of rounding up the escaped prisoners.

While the policemen spoke about their casualties, two of their colleagues - members of a special police unit known as Scorpion Force who had been combing the streets and checking at the homes of fugitives - pulled up in a white vehicle and unloaded two men in shackles.

The policemen were angry at what they saw as consider to be the nihilism shown by the attackers. "Is it reasonable to release a criminal who raped his 20-year-old daughter?" said Haidar Muhammad, one of the

guards. "Are they really religious?"

The policemen are particularly resentful of Mahdi Army men who accuse them of acting as agents of a foreign power.

"We gave our blood to protect women from being kidnapped and houses from being looted, and to stop those who are trying to spread corruption in the city by selling alcohol," said one officer, who gave his name only as Lieutenant Ihsan.

Sadr movement spokesman Mahmoud al-Sudani denied responsibility for the attack, blaming it on "foreign bodies who try to harm security in the name of the Mahdi Army".

He added, however, that the authorities had prompted the attack in Hilla by moving against Sadr elsewhere. "We had warned the Iraqi government that any escalation in Najaf would cause disorder in the country," he said.

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