

## **Iraq Stunned by Bombing Wave**

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Serious questions raised about security forces' effectiveness in wake of American troop withdrawal.

About 100 Iraqis were killed and wounded in bombings across the country on February 23, raising concerns about the ability of government forces to maintain security following the American withdrawal.

A curfew has been imposed in Salahaddin province north of the capital Baghdad, where three blasts took place, and in Babil to the south.

The interior ministry issued a statement saying 22 bombs went off in 19 different parts of the country, including eight blasts in the capital.

More than 100 civilians were killed, according to medical sources who warned that the death toll could rise

Victims and witnesses interviewed by IWPR described an atmosphere of fear during one of the bloodiest days in Iraq's recent history.

Lying in a bed in one of Baghdad's hospitals, Abu Alaa, 46, described how he was eating breakfast with his family when an explosion ripped through their home.

"We were eating, then I heard the explosion and everything collapsed in front of my eyes. I don't know what happened after that," Alaa said.

Nine of his relatives were taken to hospital, and he was uncertain of their fate.

"I don't know whether they are dead or alive - I heard my neighbour died," he said.

Having survived a bomb blast in Baghdad's Karada neighbourhood, Sura Mohammed, a ten-year-old girl, wept at the sight of her destroyed home.

"Everything came down over my brothers' and my heads. I don't know why we are still alive," said Sura, who was orphaned two years ago when an explosion killed her parents.

"I was afraid I would lose my brothers this time," she said.

Ali Ahmed, 34, a resident of Baghdad's northern Kadimiya district where a car bomb killed six people, questioned the government's ability to protect the public.

"We have no options for dealing with terrorism because the government has failed to counter it," the grocer said. "Our only option is to leave the country."

Ali Ahmed said the government should acknowledge that it was incapable of preventing bloodshed.

"Admit it - tell us that you can't protect us any more," he said.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks. But the surge in violence is a clear sign that extremist groups believe the security situation is weaker now that the Americans have left, and plan to exploit it.

The Iraqi parliament condemned the attacks, which targeted mostly civilians.

"The criminal bombings and acts of violence which targeted Iraqi civilians today are aimed at stoking discord among the people," it said in a statement.

The parliamentary committee on security and defence expressed fear about the implications of the attacks.

"Thursday's bombs are an indication of a worrying situation," committee member Hasan Jihad said. "What happened today shows us that our forces are not ready to handle the task of security."

Jihad, whose committee oversees the security ministries, said it planned to hold an investigation "to address the weak points in Iraq's security apparatus."

The government denied it was failing to protect citizens following the US withdrawal in December.

Deputy government spokesman Tahsin al-Sheikhli told IWPR that Iraqis "have to trust their security forces,

which are capable of protecting their country".

"Even if they [American forces] were here, bombings would take place", al-Sheikhli said.

The attacks ended several weeks of relative stability in which Iraq's leaders moved forward with solving the political crisis that erupted after an arrest warrant was issued for Tariq al-Hashemi, a senior Sunni politician.

That crisis had threatened to destroy the balance of power on which the country's fragile democratic system is founded.

Iraqyai, the Sunni political bloc to which Hashemi belongs, said it held Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his government responsible for failing to prevent the attacks.

Iraqiya "blames the Iraqi government and the commander of the armed forces [Maliki] for the shedding of Iraqi blood", the bloc said in a statement. "The government should resign if it is unable to maintain security."

Political analysts said insurgents could be exploiting a partial power vacuum caused by long-term disputes between Iraq's leaders as well as the US withdrawal.

"When terrorists witness the country's political leaders attacking one another and arguing amongst themselves, they think it's time to seize the opportunity to kill people, especially as there are no American troops in Iraq," Baghdad-based analyst Kadhemi al-Meqdadi said.

The blasts are "a message from terrorists that they still exist, and that they can move everywhere and kill us whenever they like", Meqdadi said.

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