

U.S. reports escalation of Iraqi attacks

Red Cross to remain in Iraq with fewer staff, more security

By Robert H. Reid
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Insurgents destroyed an American tank north of Baghdad, killing two U.S. soldiers, and wounded seven Ukrainians in the first ambush against the multinational force patrolling central Iraq, officials said Wednesday. The attacks were part of a dramatic upsurge in recent days.

U.S. policy in Iraq suffered another setback when the international Red Cross announced it was reducing its international staff in the country, two days after a deadly suicide car bombing at its Baghdad headquarters. The humanitarian group Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Doctors Without Borders, also announced it had pulled out workers.

Secretary of State Colin Powell had urged the Red Cross and other nongovernment organizations to stay in Iraq because "if they are driven out, then the terrorists win."

Attacks on the rise

Attacks on coalition forces jumped to an average of 33 a day in the past week. Two U.S. soldiers were killed when their Abrams battle tank struck a land mine or roadside bomb. Gunmen ambushed seven Ukrainian troops after two armored personnel carriers hit land mines.



SOURCES: Associated Press; ESRI

Red Cross to cut back Iraq staff

The International Committee of the Red Cross has reconsidered its deployment in Iraq following a wave of suicide bombings, one of which killed two foreign employees at the agency's Baghdad headquarters.

Approximate number of ICRC foreign staff in Iraq



ICRC maintained a small staff during the invasion... which was increased to interview prisoners of war, gradually returning to pre-war levels by Sept. Currently the agency has about 30 foreigners on staff and 600 Iraqi employees.

SOURCES: Associated Press; The International Committee of the Red Cross AP

The Iraqi Governing Council blamed the upsurge on foreign fighters. The council on Wednesday called on neighboring countries to crack down on infiltrators crossing into Iraq and provide Iraqi authorities with information about former regime figures who may be hiding on their soil, according to a statement carried by the Arabic language television station Al-Jazeera.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari will raise the border issue during a meeting of regional foreign ministers in Damascus, Syria next week, Al-Jazeera said.

The latest attacks — 233 over the last seven days according to the U.S. military — have driven the combat death toll during the occupation above the number killed before President Bush declared an end to active combat on May 1.

Two American soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division were killed and one was wounded late Tuesday when their Abrams battle tank apparently hit a land mine near Balad, 45 miles north of Baghdad, division spokeswoman Maj. Josslyn Aberle said.

Their deaths brought to 117 the number of American soldiers killed by hostile fire since May 1. A total of 114 U.S. soldiers were killed between the start of the war

March 20 and the end of April.

It was the first M1 Abrams battle tank destroyed since May 1, military officials said. Several of the 68-ton vehicles — the mainstay of the Army's armored forces — were disabled in combat before May 1.

The ambush of the Ukrainians occurred Tuesday night when two armored personnel carriers rolled over land mines near Suwayrah, about 40 miles southeast of Baghdad.

After the vehicles were disabled, gunmen opened fire on the disembarked soldiers, a spokesman for the multinational division at Camp Babylon said on condition of anonymity.

The spokesman said it was the first ambush against the Polish-led force that since September has been patrolling a belt of central Iraq south of the capital. About 1,650 Ukrainians are serving in the Polish-led force of some 9,500 peacekeepers.

In Geneva, the International Committee of the Red Cross said it would remain in Iraq, but would reduce the number of international staff — now about 30 — and increase security for those who stay. The agency has 600 Iraqi employees.

"The ICRC remains committed to helping the people of Iraq," said Pierre Krachenbuehl, the agency's director of operations.

Medecins Sans Frontieres, which operates clinics and helps at a hospital in Baghdad, said some of its international staff had left Baghdad for Jordan.

Officials of the group said medical personnel had been scheduled to leave Baghdad in the near future, but their departure was hastened by the Red Cross attack.

"The reduction was foreseen," spokeswoman Linda Van Weyenberg said. "It was sped up because of events. It's a balance between the security of the staff and the needs of the population." She did not say how many staffers left. The group previously said it had seven international staffers in Baghdad.

Baghdad police commander Maj. Gen. Hassan al-Obeid on Wednesday announced measures to bolster security in the capital, including additional 24-hour checkpoints and special patrols around sensitive locations, according to coalition-run Iraqi television.

Elsewhere, three soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division were slightly wounded Wednesday when up to seven roadside bombs exploded near their convoy in the northern city of Mosul, the military said.

And in Ramadi, 60 miles west of Baghdad, witnesses said an explosive device intended for U.S. troops detonated Wednesday as a civilian car was passing by, seriously injuring the driver.

Col. William Darley, a U.S. military spokesman, said American forces are now suffering an average of 33 attacks a day. That marked a dramatic escalation over the average of 12 daily attacks reported in July.

By late September, occupation authorities reported the average ranged from "the low teens to the mid-20s" over the previous two months. On Oct. 23, the U.S. military said attacks averaged 26 daily between Oct. 8 and Oct. 22.

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