

Suicide bombers kill more than 50 at Kurdish offices in northern Iraq

By Scheherezade Faramarzi
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

IRBIL, Iraq — Two suicide bombers with explosives wired to their bodies struck the offices of the country's two main Kurdish parties in nearly simultaneous attacks Sunday, killing at least 56 people and wounding more than 235 in the deadliest assault in Iraq in six months.

The attacks struck in the Kurdish heartland and took a heavy toll among senior leaders of Iraq's most pro-American ethnic group.

Elsewhere, an American soldier was killed, and 12 were wounded in a rocket attack on a logistics base in Balad, 50 miles north of Baghdad, the U.S. command said. The death raised the number of U.S. service members to 523 who have died since the Iraq conflict began in March.

The Irbil attackers slipped into the offices of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan along with hundreds of well-wishers gathering for the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice.

Kurdish television said both bombers were dressed as Muslim clerics.

Leaders of both parties, whose militias fought alongside U.S. soldiers during the invasion of Iraq last year, were receiving hundreds of visitors to mark the start of the four-day holiday when the blasts went off.

Guards said they did not search people because of the tradition of receiving guests during the holiday. Neither party's top leader — Jalal Talabani of the PUK and Massoud Barzani of the KDP — was in Irbil when the attacks occurred.

Although Iraq has suffered numerous suicide bombings in recent months, the attack Sunday marked the first time perpetrators have worn explosives rather than using vehicles.

Sunday's blasts came a day after a car bomb outside a police station in the northern city of Mosul killed at least nine people. Hours later, a mortar attack hit a Baghdad neighborhood, killing five people and wounding four.

U.S. officials said foreign militants or Ansar al-Islam, an al-Qaida-linked Islamic militant group based in the north that has frequently clashed with the Kurds, may have carried out the attacks. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

"We have no proof at this point (about who is responsible). It could be Ansar al-Islam. It could be al-Qaida. It could be any of a number of foreign terrorist groups operating in Iraq," said U.S. Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, coalition deputy chief of staff for operations.

Suicide bombers kill more than 50

Two suicide bombers with explosives wired to their bodies struck the offices of the country's two main Kurdish parties in Irbil killing 56 people. There were other deadly explosions in war torn Iraq.

Irbil
Suicide bombers entered the offices of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan where hundreds gathered for the Muslim holiday, the Feast of Sacrifice.

Karbala
Six Iraqis were killed when they accidentally set off an explosive while looting a former Iraqi munitions dump.



SOURCES: Associated Press; ESRI

U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer pledged to work with Iraqi security forces to capture those behind Sunday's bombings. The attackers "are seeking to halt Iraq's progress on the path to sovereignty and democracy," Bremer said in a statement.

In statements, the leaders of both parties, once bitter rivals, expressed their resolve to fight terrorism together.

"These terrorist acts are against the Islamic religion and humanity and we shall work more seriously toward uniting our (Kurdish) government," Talabani said. "We will work together in order to live in a democratic, federal Iraq."

No matter who was behind them, the blasts may heighten tensions between the Kurds and Sunni Arabs. As U.S. and Iraqi leaders try to map out the country's new form of government, some Arabs have sharply opposed Kurdish demands to retain or even expand their self-rule region in the north.

Hours after the attack, a mangled head believed to be that of one bomber lay on the floor of the KDP office. Blood and bits of flesh were spattered on the walls and ceilings. The attack on the PUK office, about eight miles away, took place at about the same time.

The U.S. command in Baghdad put the casualty toll at 56 dead and more than 200 injured. Irbil city morgue director Tawana Kareem told the AP that 57 bodies were brought to the morgue and "figures are increasing." At least 235 people were admitted to the city's three hospitals with injuries, hospital officials said.

Officials said the death toll may be far higher, with some bodies buried in the rubble or taken away by relatives.

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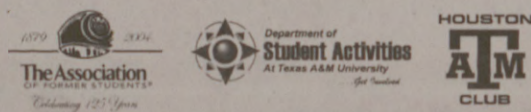
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