

Hostage crisis in Iraq escalates

By Mariam Fam
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — A team of kidnapers grabbed two Americans and a Briton in a dawn raid on their home on a leafy Baghdad street Thursday — a bold abduction that underlines the increasing danger for foreigners in the embattled capital as violence gears ahead of national elections planned for early next year.

The three worked for Gulf Services Co., a United Arab Emirates-based construction company. They were doing work under contracts with them in Baghdad," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

At least five other Westerners are being held hostage in Iraq, including an Iraq-American man, two female Italian aid workers and two French reporters, both of whom have dark hair.

Insurgents have turned to kidnappings and spectacular bombings as the weapon of choice to pressure the United States and its allies to pull out of Iraq and embarrass the interim government of Prime Minister Ayad Alawi. Even in the heavily guarded Green Zone — where the U.S. Embassy is located — foreigners were warned in the last 10 days to be on guard against possible kidnapping attempts, said a U.S. official on condition of anonymity.

More than 100 foreigners have been kidnapped, some in a bid to collect lucrative ransoms. Many have been executed, cre-

ating a seige-like mentality among the dwindling international community.

Iraqi interim President Ghazi al-Yawer, on a visit to The Hague, Netherlands, insisted that security was Iraq's priority and that it was "a little bit too premature to decide" whether elections would be held as planned.

By trying to scare away foreign workers, the kidnapers could be trying to fan such resentment and further stall reconstruction projects by driving away those who coordinate and run programs. Other kidnapping victims have been blue-collar workers, driving trucks, rebuilding electrical plants and guarding building sites.

Many members of the besieged international community have hired armed guards and built blast walls around their compounds to ward against the daily mortars and car bombs. But some companies — whose work is critical to Iraq's reconstruction — are pulling out after concluding the risks are too great.

Anthony Cordesman, a military analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said the violence — including kidnappings — has hurt plans to revive the country's economy.

"There is no question that a mix of attacks, kidnappings, bombings, etc. has had a major effect of blocking foreign investment, leading firms to drop out of aid projects, restricting activity to 'safe' or 'safer' areas and disrupting any smooth flow of activity while forcing massive expenditures of security," he said.

Airport security increases

By Leslie Miller
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Starting next week, all airline passengers must take off their jackets before passing through metal detectors, and more will be subjected to pat-down searches and checks for explosives, the Transportation Security Administration announced Thursday.

Screeners will advise passengers of the new procedures when they put their carry-on bags on the conveyor belt, TSA spokeswoman Yolanda Clark said.

The goal is "to fortify our screening procedures to detect the presence of explosives carried on a person or in carry-on luggage," she said.

Bags checked onto planes must pass through machines that can detect various kinds of explosives.

But neither the walk-through metal detectors that passengers use on the way to gates nor the X-ray machines for carry-on bags can sense plastic explosives.

Now, every passenger selected for secondary screening after passing through metal detectors will have their carry-on items subjected to checks by explosives trace detectors.


Screeners also have more discretion to conduct pat-down searches and check carry-on bags for bombs.

Air Travelers Association President David Stempler said the changes are a good idea, though some passengers could be upset by hand searches.

"Given the extraordinary need for it — given the recent bombing of the planes in Russia, heightened security alerts, tension leading up to the election — I think these are necessary evils that passengers have to put up with," he said.

Two Chechen women are suspected of carrying bombs onto two Russian planes that exploded almost simultaneously last month.

The Sept. 11 commission recommended in its final report that the TSA make it a high priority to improve the ability to detect explosives on passengers at security checkpoints.



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