

Iraq violence surges in February

BAGHDAD (AFP) — The number of Iraqis killed in February rose by 33 percent over January, reversing a six-month trend of reduced violence, in a setback to the U.S. military plan to curb the bloodshed ravaging the country.

The combined figures obtained by AFP from the interior, defense and health ministries showed that the total number of Iraqis killed in February was 721, including 636 civilians, compared with 541 dead in January.

It reverses the six-month trend of a steady fall in casualties across the country on the back of a massive US and Iraqi military assault, mainly targeting Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The February death toll is up after a steady fall in the preceding six months. The monthly tolls were 541 in January, 568 in December, 606 in November, 887 in October, 917 in September and 1,856 in August.

The number of people wounded in February was 847.

January's death toll reached a 23-month low, with US commanders saying that all types of attacks were down to levels not seen before the February 2006 bombing of a Shiite shrine in the town of Samarra that triggered a wave of violence.

The bloodshed that erupted after the shrine attack peaked in January 2007 with 1,992 deaths reported by the three ministries.

The jump in February's toll seems to have been caused by two major attacks during the month.

On February 1, at least 98 people were slaughtered when a female suicide bomber blew herself up amid a crowd of pet lovers in Baghdad's popular al-Ghazl animal market.

And in another brazen attack last week, at least 48 people were killed when a suicide bomber blew himself up in a crowd of pilgrims at a rest stop in the town of Iskandariyah, south of Baghdad.

U.S. officials blamed both bombings on the Al-Qaeda in Iraq group.

The pilgrims were on their way to the central shrine city of Karbala for the holy ceremony of Arbaeen, one of Shiite Islam's holiest days.

U.S. President George W. Bush's controversial strategy to send extra troops is seen as the key factor in stifling the violence.

For the first time since the end of the U.S.-led war in 2003, it saw U.S. troops not just clearing restive neighborhoods, but also setting up outposts and retaining the cleared areas to prevent insurgents from returning.

Following the drop in violence since the middle of last year and because of sustained domestic pressure from Democrats, Bush late in 2007 signaled a cut-back in the level of troops deployed in Iraq.

U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates has said that U.S. forces in Iraq would be reduced to 100,000 by the end of 2008 from the current 158,000.

But last month he said there could be a temporary halt in the reduction of troop numbers, although on Saturday the Washington Post reported that the Bush administration would go ahead with the draw-back plans.

Citing an unnamed senior administration official, the paper said the temporary halt, announced by Gates, would last just four to six weeks next summer to assess conditions on the ground.

"This is not a stall tactic," The Post quoted the official as saying. "I fully expect further reductions this year, in '08, and so does the president. It's just a question of when will the reductions be announced, when will they take effect... and what will be the pace."

Hezbollah slams U.S. warship as 'interference' in Lebanon

BEIRUT (AFP) — The Hezbollah slammed Washington's dispatch of the USS Cole to waters off Lebanon as military interference, as the Western-backed government said it did not ask for the warship to be sent.

The condemnation came as pro-government dailies saw sending the vessel as a clear signal to Syria, which is being blamed by the ruling majority for blocking a presidential vote in Beirut.

"This decision proves that it's the United States which is interfering in Lebanese affairs, and that this interference has taken on a military slant," Hezbollah MP Hussein Hajj Hassan told AFP.

The United States said on Thursday it had sent the guided-missile destroyer to the waters off Lebanon, which has been embroiled in a paralyzing political crisis for months.

The USS Cole was the target of a bombing by Al-Qaeda extremists in October 2000 in the Yemeni port of Aden that killed 17 U.S. sailors.

It is "a show of support for regional stability" because of "concern about the situation in Lebanon," a U.S. official said on condition of anonymity.

Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, whose government is backed by the West and most Arab countries, stressed during a meeting with Arab ambassadors that Beirut did not ask for the warship and summoned a top U.S. diplomat for "clarifications."

"We did not ask anyone to send warships," Siniora said, adding that no U.S. warship was in "Lebanese waters."

Earlier Siniora summoned U.S. charge d'affaires Michele Sison "to ask her to clarify the



presence of the USS Cole" in the Mediterranean, a government source told AFP.

"Mrs Sison assured him that the warship was in international waters and had been dispatched to guarantee regional stability," the source added.

"On Hezbollah's concerns, I would express

some of our own concerns with Hezbollah's actions. So I'll just leave it at that," White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe told reporters.

Lebanese parliament speaker and opposition member Nabih Berri meanwhile said in a television interview that the dispatch of the USS Cole was aimed at giving support to Israel's military action in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip.

"The goal is to take attention away from what is happening in Gaza. The USS Cole is here to back the Israeli plan in Gaza," where 31 Palestinians have been killed since Wednesday in Israeli air strikes, he said.

Lebanon has been without a president since last November amid political feuding between the ruling parliamentary majority and the opposition.

Fears of civil strife in Lebanon have mounted over the continued deadlock and warnings of wider conflict after the February 12 assassination in Syria of top Hezbollah commander Imad Mughnieh.

Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah mourned Mughnieh in a massive public rally, threatening "open war" against Israel, which fought a devastating July-August 2006 war against the Shiite group.

"Wars begin by an exchange of messages. The American decision is the first message to its opponents in the region saying 'we are here'," said Wehbe Katisaha, a retired Lebanese army general.

Beirut has also been the scene of recent street clashes between supporters of the rival factions, prompting several Persian Gulf nations and Western states to advise their citizens against traveling to Lebanon.

Israeli missiles silence baby's laughter in Gaza

The innocent laughter of six-month-old baby Mohammed al-Bor'i stopped forever on Wednesday night when shrapnel from an Israeli missile and rubble struck the infant in the head, minutes after he enjoyed his last meal.

"The baby sucked milk, he was playing with his mother; I was reading a book when a rocket hit the Ministry of Interior," said Nasser al-Bor'i, the baby's father.

With the first missile, the electricity was cut and darkness filled the ill-fated house. Stones and pieces of the asbestos ceiling fell onto the head of the laughing child. The explosions continued as two other missiles hit the building.

"I looked for my baby in the darkness between the rubble; I did not know where he was. When he cried once I followed the direction of his voice," Nasser al-Bor'i said. "My hands touched my baby who was breathing hard; I felt warm liquid on my two hands and realized that he



was wounded."

Al-Bor'i carried his son to the nearby Shifa Hospital as the blood streamed from his tiny head. In the hospital, al-Bor'i became hysterical when he realized that his only child had been killed.

Tears poured from al-Bor'i's eyes

when he saw Mohammed's shoes. "After five years of treatment for sterility,

[my wife and] I had a baby. I can't imagine that I lost him in a second."

Toys, a plastic bike, a crib and clothes were covered by the heap of rubble inside Mohammed's be-

droom. Cutout magazine pictures of laughing babies decorated the walls, a sad reminder of the joy lost in the strike.

Mohammed's mother suffered shock and fell unconscious when she realized that the child had died. She laid on a hospital bed while her baby was in the morgue. On Thursday morning she cried when she returned home from the hospital to see Mohammed's empty crib.

Mohammed al-Bor'i was not the only child to be killed in the series of Israeli air strikes across the Gaza strip on Wednesday. In the northern Gaza Strip town of Jabalia, three other children, Anas al-Manama, 10, Bilal Hijazi, 11, and Mohammed Hamada, 11, were also killed in an Israeli air strike, Palestinian medical sources reported.

At least 19 Palestinian civilians and militants were killed and dozens wounded by the continuing Israeli air strikes on Gaza in the last two days.

(Source: middleeast.org)

Iraq in the time of cholera

It is the kind of news that everybody had been dreading. An outbreak of cholera in Iraq, which started in two Northern provinces, has already reached Baghdad and has become Iraq's biggest cholera outbreak in recent memory. "This frightening and dangerous situation," as stated by Bahktiyar Ahmed, a UNICEF emergency health facilitator, serves to underscore the unrelenting threat to people already affected by a devastated health care system.

Statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that there have already been more than 3,300 cases of cholera in the country, and more than 33,000 cases of diarrhea — which could be a milder form of the disease. The cholera epidemic aggravates what is, under any measure, a most serious humanitarian and public health emergency.

According to Jeremy Hobbs, director of Oxfam International, "The terrible violence in Iraq has masked the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Malnutrition amongst children has dramatically increased and basic services, ruined by years of wars and sanctions, cannot meet the needs of the Iraqi people. Millions of Iraqis have been forced to flee the violence, either to another part of Iraq or abroad. Many of those are living in dire poverty."

It is estimated that 28 percent of children are malnourished, compared with 19 percent before the 2003

invasion. In 2006, more than 11 percent of newborn babies were born underweight, compared with four percent in 2003. Malnutrition contributes to death from other conditions such as intestinal and respiratory infections, malaria and typhoid.

The lack of food is affecting not only children. It is estimated that four million Iraqis — 15 percent of the total population — regularly cannot buy enough to eat, and are now dependent on food assistance.

Children's suffering doesn't end there. Last year, the Association of Psychologists of Iraq (API) released a report that states that the US-led invasion has greatly affected the psychological development of Iraqi children. The Association's spokesperson, Maruan Abdullah, stated, "It was incredible how strong the results were. The only things they

[the children] have in their minds are guns, bullets, death and a fear of the U.S. occupation." What can one say to those that are responsible for the destruction of children's lives and hopes?

Those unable to resist the situation any longer have fled in terror to other parts of the country or to neighboring countries, which have seen their health and social services totally overwhelmed by the sudden influx of millions of refugees.

Presently, 70 percent of the population in Iraq is without adequate water supplies and 80 percent lacks adequate sanitation. Dr. Abdul-Rahman Adil Ali of the

Baghdad Health Directorate has warned about the serious consequences of a defective sewage system. "In some of Baghdad's poor neighborhoods," he said, "people drink water which is mixed with sewage."

Hospitals are unable to respond to people's needs. 90 percent of hospitals lack essential resources such as basic medical and surgical supplies. Most international aid agencies have left the country, a situation compounded by the emigration of qualified personnel, particularly medical personnel. Of the 34,000 doctors living in the country in 2003, 12,000 have emigrated and over 2,000 have been murdered.

The war is not only affecting Iraqis. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office has issued a report to lawmakers stating that the war could ultimately cost the U.S. government well over a trillion dollars — at least double what has already been spent. That will happen even under the best conditions — an immediate and substantial reduction of troops — and impact American taxpayers for at least the next ten years.

U.S. soldiers have psychological wounds to last for a lifetime. A 2004 study of 1,300 Fort Bragg paratroopers who participated in the war showed that 17.4 percent had Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. In addition, many soldiers have suffered so many injuries that the term "polytrauma" is being increasingly used by military doctors.

(Source: aljazeera.com)

King calls for U.S. help in Middle East

PRINCETON, N.J. (AP) — Jordan's King Abdullah II warned Friday that unless a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian agreement is reached during the Bush administration's final months, the chances for a lasting Middle East peace could be "set back, perhaps for decades."

"We are in the best possible position to resolve 60 years of conflict between Israel and Palestine," Abdullah told an audience at Princeton University. "It will be two or three years before a new American president will be willing to look at the Middle East."

Bush leaves office in January.

Abdullah's message was similar to one he delivered to a joint session of Congress last year and is what he will likely tell Bush when he meets with him at the White House on Tuesday.

Abdullah said resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more important to the future of the Middle East than any other issue, including the war in Iraq. By agreeing soon to allow a Palestinian state, he said, Israel could quickly gain diplomatic and trade relationships with 57 countries that now refuse to deal with it.

Key for the Palestinians in any peace deal is Israel's return to pre-1967 borders, the right of return of refugees and their descendants, and the status of Beit-ul-Moqaddas — all issues that have derailed peace efforts before.

Abdullah's comments came as Israel's deputy defense minister threatened a major offensive if rocket attacks on Israel continue from the Gaza Strip. Israeli armaments targeted Palestinian rocket operations in Gaza, leaving 15 wounded, including four children, according to Gaza officials.

Abdullah, 46, took the throne in Jordan in 1999 after his father, King Hussein died. Like his father, he is seen as a moderate in the Middle East.

On Thursday, Abdullah met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to discuss the situation in the region.

UN chief concerned over escalation of violence in Middle East

United Nations (PTI) — Voicing deep concern over the recent escalation of violence in southern Israel and Gaza, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has highlighted the "urgent need" to calm the situation.

"These events underscore the urgent need for a calming of violence, and must not be allowed to deter the continuation of the political process," Ban said in a statement.

He also condemned the killing of four Palestinian children, including an infant, in Gaza in Israeli strikes.

Ban called on Israel to "exercise maximum restraint and ensure respect for international humanitarian law so as not to endanger civilians."

Meanwhile, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East confirmed that the Palestinian infant was a six-month-old baby who was killed in the compound of a school run by the agency.

The infant was the grandchild of the school guard, who lives on site and is tasked with keeping that school free from militants.

The agency said that in addition to condemning the killing of the baby, it deplored any violence that placed its schools and other facilities at risk.