



U.S. STILL FACES OPPOSITION IN IRAQ

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Despite progress reconstructing many aspects of life in Iraq, U.S. forces continue to square off with Sunni and Shiite Muslims in different parts of the country.

Hundreds of U.S. and Iraqi troops surrounded the turbulent Iraqi city of Fallujah on Monday following last Wednesday's gruesome attack in which an anti-American mob ambushed a group of contractors, beating and dragging four bodies through the streets.

Fallujah is located inside the area known as Iraq's Sunni Triangle, which has been the focal point of Iraqi resistance to the U.S. occupation. Although they make up only about 35 percent of Iraq's population of 24 million, Sunni Arabs played a dominant role in the reign of Saddam Hussein, a fellow Sunni from the region.

Nearly two-thirds of insurgent attacks have taken place in the triangle, where former Saddam cronies still hold power and would like to see the United States fail.

New Shiite threat

However, there were also weekend clashes with the country's Shiite majority, which has mostly avoided violence with coalition forces.

In a coordinated uprising, tens of thousands of men loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr, a 31-year-old Shiite cleric, rose up against the American-led occupation in Baghdad, the holy city of Najaf and at least two other cities in southern Iraq.

At least seven American soldiers were killed in the Baghdad slum, Sadr City, one of the worst single losses for the American forces in any firefight since the capital was captured a year ago. At least 30 Iraqis were killed and more than 110 wounded in the fighting.

Sadr City is named after Sadr's father, Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, who was murdered along with two elder sons during the rule of ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, reportedly for defying the dictator.

Until this weekend, Sadr was eclipsed by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the 73-year-old cleric who demanded direct elections sooner rather than later and emerged as the most influential Shiite leader. The two do not talk.

Sadr, considered too young and radical by many Shiite elders, is several ranks and many years away from attaining the title of ayatollah, which would mean his rulings would carry the weight of religious law.

But his message appears to be gaining popularity through his savvy use of public appearances and lengthy speeches. He has also built up a well-equipped private militia.

The young Sadr's image is now a familiar sight on posters held aloft by chanting supporters alongside the more conventional ones of his father and other senior clerics, as well as the founding fathers of Shiite Islam.

Last week, American authorities shut down Sadr's newspaper, Al Hawza. Although the paper did not print calls for attacks, U.S. officials said false reporting, including articles that blamed Americans for recent deadly explosions, could touch off violence.

On Sunday, Sadr called for his followers to "terrorize your enemy."

"There is no use for demonstrations, as your enemy loves to terrify and suppress opinions, and despises peoples," he said in a statement.

"I ask you not to resort to demonstrations because they have become a losing card and we should seek other ways," he said. "Terrorize your enemy, as we cannot remain silent over its violations."

U.S. plans to stop Sadr

Paul Bremer, the top U.S. administrator in Iraq, declared Sadr an "outlaw" who threatens Iraq's security.

"Effectively he is attempting to establish his authority in the place of the legitimate authority. We will not tolerate this," Bremer told a team meeting convened to discuss how to respond to Sadr.

An Iraqi judge issued an arrest warrant for Sadr Monday in connection with the killing of another cleric last year at a Najaf mosque.

Meanwhile, President Bush said Monday he remains committed to the June 30 deadline for transferring power to the Iraqis.

"The deadline remains firm," the president told reporters.

Mr. Bush also voiced criticisms of Sadr and his followers.

"This is one person that is deciding that rather than allowing democracy to flourish, he's going to exercise force," the president said. "We just can't let it stand."

By Online NewsHour

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