

13 U.S. Marines killed as fighting spreads in Iraq

U.S. forces faced combat in at least four Iraqi cities, raising concerns that the attacks are well-planned

By Matthew Schofield
and David Swanson
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

RAMADI, Iraq — Three days shy of the one-year anniversary of Baghdad's fall, intense combat spread to at least four more cities in Iraq on Tuesday, killing at least 13 U.S. Marines.

Some of the fiercest fighting, which was witnessed by a Knight Ridder journalist, took place in Ramadi, where eight Marines from Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Regiment, were killed when a multi-pronged assault caught the Marines by surprise as they were conducting routine patrols on foot at about 9 a.m.

The attackers fired rocket-propelled grenades, mortar and assault rifles in what appeared to be a well-coordinated attack by at least four groups of fighters numbering between four and 15 members each.

Two other Marine companies were also ambushed in Ramadi. There was no word on their casualties.

By the end of the day, U.S. troops seemed to have taken control of most contested areas, but the fighting was far more extensive than at any time since Saddam Hussein fled Baghdad on April 9, 2003.

Battles also were reported in Nasiriyah, Kut and Karbala, cities that had been peaceful. Fighting continued in Baghdad's Sadr City, Fallujah and Amarah, as well as other cities.

The list of coalition members involved in the combat grew: In addition to Americans, troops from Italy, Spain, Great Britain, Ukraine and Poland were attacked.

No official death toll was released, but in addition to the U.S. Marines who died in Ramadi, at least five were killed in Fallujah, according to local

officials. One Ukrainian soldier was reported killed during fighting in Kut, and two Polish soldiers died during battles in Karbala.

Iraqi deaths during fighting Monday and Tuesday appeared to number around 100, including 40 killed overnight in Sadr City, Baghdad's sprawling Shiite slum. Italian soldiers killed 15 Iraqis in fighting in Nasiriyah, and British troops killed 12 Iraqis in Amarah.

Two South Korean workers were reportedly kidnapped in southern Iraq.

In Washington, Bush administration officials cast the violence as the work of a small section of Iraq's Shiite majority, not a mass rebellion.

That stance reflected U.S. hopes that the unrest doesn't catch on more widely among Shiites, which along with the year-old resistance from once-dominant Sunni Muslims, would imperil the U.S. rebuilding mission in Iraq.

State Department spokesman Adam Ereli dismissed anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, referring to his militia as "his small number of followers." Ereli said, "We don't see them as representative of a religious cause but rather as representative of political gangsterism."

An official bulletin from the U.S.-led coalition expressed concern, however.

"These groups have become more sophisticated and may be coordinating their anti-coalition efforts, posing an even more significant threat," the Coalition Provisional Authority's operational threat update said Tuesday.

The Arab satellite television network Al-Jazeera reported that U.S. Marines in Fallujah were fighting Shiite supporters of al-Sadr, and not the Saddam loyalists they typically encounter in the town. If true, the development would be astounding: Shiites and Sunnis are centuries-old Muslim rivals.

In Washington, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reported that

Fallujah was under American control and that several people wanted in connection with the deaths of four civilian security workers last week had been taken into custody.

Meanwhile, al-Sadr, the 30-year-old cleric whose militia was behind much of the recent violence, switched sanctuaries, slipping from an ancient mosque in his hometown of Kufa to the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf, about 10 miles away.

U.S. officials said Monday that they were seeking to arrest al-Sadr in connection with the murder last year of a pro-American Shiite ayatollah who was hacked to death in the shrine.

On Tuesday, a coalition official revealed that two other charges had

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Coalition Provisional Authority operational threat update

been lodged against al-Sadr — one in connection with stealing from mosque collection boxes and the other regarding the murder of a pregnant woman believed to have been killed by al-Sadr bodyguards.

Official information about specific battles was difficult to come by. Spokesmen for the U.S. Marines declined to say where their units were fighting.

An informal count found at least 23 Americans have died since the fighting started Sunday.

The U.S. Army announced Tuesday that two soldiers were killed Monday and a third on Tuesday in three separate attacks by rocket-propelled grenades in ambushes near Baghdad's most revered Shiite shrine.

Witnesses in Sadr City said 40 Iraqis, most of them al-Sadr followers, died as they fought U.S. troops and Iraqi police for control of police stations.

The witnesses said the fighting started at about 8 p.m. and lasted until midnight.

"The Americans had so much force, so much strength," said one witness. "Many wondered what Sadr's followers thought they could possibly do against such strength. Many died."

Throughout Tuesday, U.S. troops patrolled the poor suburb by helicopter and tank, and tension remained high.

The fighting was also intense overnight in Fallujah, despite a 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew imposed by American forces.

Officials in Fallujah said five U.S. Marines were killed in the fighting. By noon Tuesday, locals said the town, about 35 miles west of Baghdad, was under American control. As the day passed, they said the Americans moved back toward the perimeter of the city.

Tanks sat on the highway leading to the city from Baghdad, with barrels pointing toward oncoming traffic and the town. A Red Crescent ambulance weaved through the coils of razor wire at the barrier, transporting four dead Iraqis to Baghdad, where the electricity was working and they could be kept cool. Marines at the checkpoint were stern, refusing even to reveal their hometowns or chat about stateside news.

"Nobody is going in," one said, finally. "If people want to leave, they can leave, but nobody goes in."

Town residents said U.S. Marines were on every corner.

"The town was in hiding, the town was gone, nobody was moving," said Dr. Hibaa Wazan, who spent the past several years treating patients at the local hospital. She added that the daytime quiet followed a very loud night.

"The bombs started falling as soon as the curfew was set last night," she said. "All night, there was a constant

gunfire, and several times an hour, there were very loud explosions."

Wazan said they evacuated all the patients capable of being moved, leaving only a few of the very ill to be cared for. The strain through the night, when one bomb landed outside the hospital doors, persuaded her to accompany a heart attack victim out of the city to a Baghdad hospital — and to not return.

But the fiercest fighting for Americans was at Ramadi.

In the aftermath of the ambush, U.S. Marines stepped warily around Iraqi bodies, looking for any more of their comrades. American Cobra and Chinook helicopters thumped overhead, and Bradley fighting vehicles rumbled on the roads.

Marines acknowledged they were surprised as they moved through the town on foot. The attackers were well armed and well coordinated and seemed to come from nowhere.

The Marines responded with massive fire, armor and air support over the next five hours. Fighting went house to house, with Marines at one point leaping from one rooftop to the next as they chased and caught some of the fighters.

Marines later read the names of eight comrades who had died in combat. Iraqi casualties appeared to be much higher; four bodies were still lying in the dust while Americans went corpse by corpse looking first for their own.

At one spot near the shot-out shell of a U.S. Humvee lay the body of one attacker, clad in a surplus U.S. flak jacket. The head was partially melted or blown away.

An Iraqi man working as a translator paced toward one of the bodies, kicked it, then turned away.

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Officials say rebellion may be turning point

U.S. officials are calling the rebellion in Iraq on Tuesday the work of a minority and downplaying the violence

By Warren P. Strobel
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Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — Bush administration officials sought Tuesday to cast the rebellion in Iraq as the work of a minority, saying plans to transfer sovereignty to Iraqis on June 30 remain on target despite spreading violence.

Privately, however, senior officials said the spreading battle between the United States and followers of anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr could be a turning point in the yearlong U.S. effort to pacify and rebuild Iraq.

The U.S. approach is to launch targeted raids against al-Sadr's followers, but not to mount a major military strike on the cleric himself, the senior officials said.

The officials conceded the crack-down is a gamble. If the raids degenerate into a battle between coalition forces and Shiites — which, they concede, is what al-Sadr wants — then the Shiites, who make up roughly 60 percent of Iraq's population, could turn against the U.S. occupation.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they aren't authorized spokespersons and because their views are at odds with the administration's efforts to remain upbeat.

The Shiite attacks represent a new level of resistance to the U.S. presence in Iraq. Most of the violence until this week has been perpetrated by members of Iraq's Sunni minority, who were dominant under the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Publicly, Bush administration officials attempted to play down the significance of the growing violence.

"Sadr and his small number of followers — we don't see them as representative of a religious cause but rather as representative of political gangsterism," said State Department spokesman Adam Ereli.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said in a radio interview that "the major problem we're having in the south right now is from Sadr. ... I don't think they reflect the views of all of the Shias in the south. ... Other clerics in the south have not come out in support of what Sadr is doing."

Aides to President Bush reiterated they have no intention of changing the June 30 deadline for handing over sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government.

Separately, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said U.S. commanders in Iraq would get more troops if they requested them. There currently are about 135,000 U.S. military personnel in the country.

"They will decide what they need and they will get what they need," Rumsfeld said at a news conference in Norfolk, Va., with NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

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