

Insurgents launch attacks on Iraqi polling centers

BY ROBERT H. REID
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Insurgents stepped up attacks Thursday against polling centers across Iraq, killing at least a dozen people, including a U.S. Marine, in the rebel campaign to frighten Iraqis away from participating in this weekend's election.

As part of an intensifying campaign of intimidation, an al-Qaida affiliate led by Jordanian mastermind Abu Musab al-Zarqawi posted a videotape on the Internet showing the murder of a candidate from the party of interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi.

The tape included a warning to Allawi personally: "You traitor, wait for the angel of death."

To protect voters on Sunday, hundreds of American soldiers began moving out of their garrison on the western edge of Baghdad to take up positions at smaller bases throughout the city to respond more quickly to any election day attacks.

Sunni Muslim insurgents have threatened to disrupt the balloting when Iraqis choose a 275-member National Assembly and governing councils in the country's 18 provinces. Voters in the Kurdish self-governing area of the north will select a new regional parliament.

In the former rebel stronghold of Fallujah, where opposition to the balloting is strong, U.S. Marines drove through the city Thursday, urging people through loudspeakers to turn out Sunday. Spokesman 1st Lt. Lyle Gilbert said the Marines were "encouraging people to capitalize on this opportunity to exercise their voice by voting in the upcoming free elections."

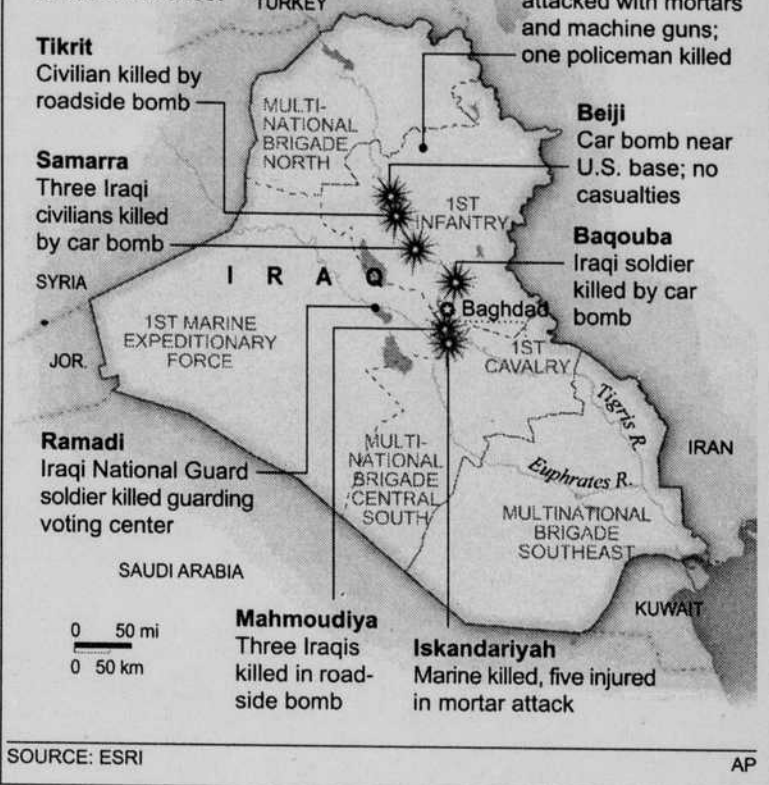
Iraqi newspapers also published for the first time the names of some 7,000 National Assembly candidates, many of whose identities had been kept secret to protect them from assassination.

The interim government will deploy an additional 2,500 troops to help guard the elections, the Defense Ministry said. A total of 300,000 Iraqi and multinational troops will provide security, with Iraq's U.S.-trained forces taking the lead role.

About 9,000 Iraqi troops also are being dispatched to guard

Violence increases as election nears

More than 11 Iraqis and one U.S. Marine were killed Thursday in pre-election violence.



oil pipelines, which insurgents repeatedly have targeted.

Iraq's national security adviser, Qassim Dawoud, acknowledged that security remains shaky in four provinces but expressed optimism that extensive security measures would protect voters and encourage turnout.

However, attacks were reported Thursday in at least seven provinces, including relatively peaceful Basra in the south, where militants fired mortar shells at four schools designated as polling stations.

U.S. troops and rebels also exchanged fire Thursday on Haifa Street in central Baghdad, witnesses said.

One Marine was killed and five others were wounded when insurgents fired mortars at their base near Iskandariyah, about 30 miles south of Baghdad in tense Babil province.

Another three Iraqis were killed and seven injured when a roadside bomb missed a U.S. convoy in Mahmoudiya, a religiously mixed area of Babil province, hospital officials said.

Most of the attacks occurred in Salaheddin province in an area of the Sunni triangle north and west of Baghdad that U.S. and Iraqi officials have identified as one of the key trouble spots. Three Iraqi civilians were killed Thursday when a car bomb exploded in Samarra, 60 miles north of Baghdad.

Hours later, mortar shells fell on a designated polling station in Samarra, police said. Armed men in Samarra blew up a school administration building after first ordering the staff to leave, police Lt. Qassim Mohammed said. The destroyed building had been scheduled to be a voting center Sunday.

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