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Escalating violence causes Iraq to close its borders

BY MARIAM FAM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — A car bomb detonated by remote control exploded Thursday in Baghdad, killing two Iraqis but missing a U.S. military convoy as insurgent violence claimed more than 50 lives. Clashes between Iraqi police and rebels erupted along a major highway southeast of the capital.

With violence on the rise after the Jan. 30 election, Iraqi officials announced they would seal the country's borders for five days this month around a major Shiite religious holiday. Last year during the holiday, about 180 people were killed in suicide attacks at Shiite shrines.

The car bomb detonated on Tahrir Square in the heart of Baghdad, shattering the vehicle and setting several other cars on fire. At least two Iraqis were killed and two others were wounded, U.S. military spokesman Lt. Col. James Hutton said.

An American military patrol had just passed through the area, but there were no U.S. casualties, Hutton said.

Most of the violence Thursday targeted Iraq's security forces, part of an apparent insurgent campaign to undermine public confidence after police and soldiers managed to prevent catastrophic attacks during the elections.

The biggest attack occurred in Salman Pak, 12 miles southeast of Baghdad, when insurgents attacked Iraqi policemen who came to look for weapons, showering them with machine-gun fire, rocket-propelled grenades and mortar rounds, police said.

Iraq's Interior Ministry said 14 policemen were killed, 65 were wounded and six were missing after the two-hour gun battle. Four insurgents also died in the fighting, the ministry said.

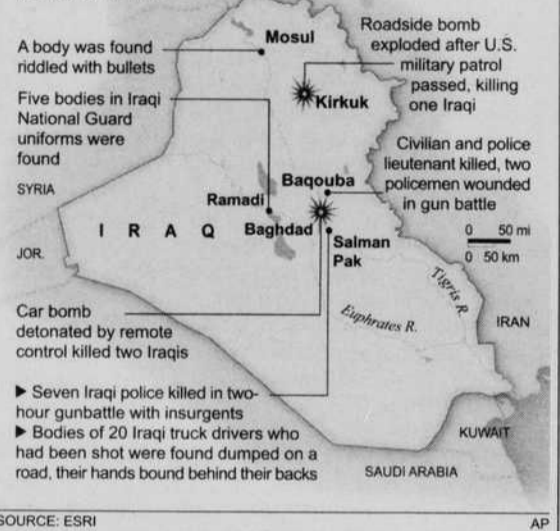
"We were on patrol to search for weapons," wounded policeman Waad Jassim said from his hospital bed. "When we arrived, they opened heavy fire at us. There were many of them, and some were charging out of houses."

Elsewhere, bodies of 20 Iraqi truck drivers who had been shot were found dumped on a road, hands bound behind their backs, police Capt. Ahmed Ismail said.

Gunmen fired on an Iraqi police patrol Thursday in Baqouba, north of Baghdad, triggering a gun battle that killed a civilian and wounded two police officers, officials

Post-election violence on the rise

Much of Thursday's violence in Iraq targeted Iraq's security forces, part of an apparent insurgent campaign to undermine public confidence.



said. Assaults also killed a police lieutenant in Baqouba.

Five bodies in Iraqi National Guard uniforms were found Thursday in the insurgent stronghold of Ramadi, 70 miles west of Baghdad. Hospital director Ala al Ani said residents reported that the slain men were among 13 guardsmen who went missing recently. Two insurgents were killed Thursday in clashes with U.S. forces north of Ramadi, residents and hospital officials said.

A videotape obtained Thursday showed gunmen killing four blindfolded men who identified themselves as Iraqi policemen sitting cross-legged on the floor of a room. A date stamp on the video indicated it was recorded Feb. 3.

Elsewhere, a body was found riddled with bullets in Mosul, and in the northern oil center of Kirkuk, a roadside bomb exploded several minutes after a U.S. military patrol passed, killing one Iraqi, police said. In Baghdad, gunmen shot to death a hospital receptionist.

House Republicans oppose increased beer-tax proposal

BY BRAD CAIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SALEM — Advocates of higher beer taxes said Thursday they think most Oregonians would be willing to pay a few cents more per glass for their favorite brew to help fund alcohol addiction programs.

But the beer-tax idea went flat almost immediately, with House Speaker Karen Minnis signaling that House Republicans have no intention of bending their no-new-taxes pledge, regardless of the cause.

Further, supporters of the beer tax got into hot water with state police when they tried to hand out free beer to legislators to show them how "cheap" beer is in Oregon.

At a Capitol news conference, advocates of higher beer taxes displayed 12-packs of canned beer that sold in a grocery store for \$4.99 — a low price made possible, they said, by Oregon's low taxes.

"Cheap beer is the direct cause of our out-of-control youth alcohol abuse

problems and the damage, death and violence it creates," said Howard Scaman, an Alaska activist who's now working to raise Oregon's tax.

Afterward, Scaman went to deliver the 12-packs of low-end beer to legislators' offices but was ordered to stop by Rusty Wolfe, a state police trooper assigned to the Capitol.

Wolfe said that many lawmakers' offices are staffed by interns who aren't yet 21 years old.

Wolfe did not cite Scaman, however. At issue in the beer-tax dispute is Oregon's tax of \$2.60 per 31-gallon barrel, which is 46th lowest in the nation and hasn't been raised since 1977.

Scaman and other advocates came to the Capitol to support a bill co-sponsored by Rep. Jackie Dingfelder, D-Portland, and Sen. Bill Morrisette, D-Springfield, to boost the beer tax by as much as \$33 a barrel — or 10 cents for a 12-ounce bottle.

The increase could raise \$150 million for prevention and treatment of alcohol and drug addiction.

Noting the no-new-taxes environment in the Capitol, the two legislators call their plan a "cost recovery fee."

"It's not so much a tax as an attempt to collect a long-past-due bill from the beer industry from some of the problems associated with its products," Morrisette said.

To keep from financially harming Oregon's growing microbrew industry, the beer tax would amount to a nickel-a-drink increase on beers produced by small breweries.

But beer industry lobbyist Paul Romain, who persuaded lawmakers to kill previous beer tax hikes, said all beer drinkers shouldn't be saddled with higher prices to help a relatively small number of problem drinkers.

"Don't have Joe Six-pack paying for the abusers," Romain said.

Regardless of how Dingfelder and Morrisette characterize their proposal, Minnis and other House Republicans view it as nothing but a tax increase, a spokesman for Minnis said.

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IN BRIEF

Photography auction to raise funds for museum

The University Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art will auction off more than 60 photographs by prominent photographers from around the country Saturday night at the museum.

A viewing of the photographs, which are on display on the museum's main floor, will begin at 5:30 p.m., and the auction will start at 7 p.m. Tickets to the event cost \$30 per

person and include entrance to the 5:30 p.m. reception, where there will be music, refreshments and hors d'oeuvres. Tickets are available at the museum. All proceeds will go toward the Photography at Oregon programs at the museum.

Photographs can be previewed online at jsma.uoregon.edu.

For more information about the auction or about placing absentee bids, contact museum Special Events Manager Miriam Jordan at 541-346-0973.

— Jared Paben

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