

# Iraq deaths raises concern of emerging religious clash

BY ALEXANDRA ZAVIS  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Mortars, bombs and drive-by gunmen killed at least 24 Iraqis, and the new government Monday vowed to capture and punish the killers of at least 50 other people found slain in the past 48 hours, charging that insurgents were trying to start open warfare between the country's Shiite majority and Sunni minority.

Underscoring the threat, two car bombs exploded within minutes at a mostly Shiite Baghdad market, killing at least nine soldiers and a civilian in a rash of attacks that many worry could deepen the conflict beyond the deadly insurgency against U.S. forces and their Iraqi allies.

With the body count rising, an influential association of Sunni clerics accused the government's Shiite-dominated security forces of participating in the carnage — a claim the Sunni defense minister and other government officials rejected.

"The new government will strike with an iron fist against any criminal who tries to harm a Sunni or a Shiite citizen," Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari told reporters after visiting Iraq's top Shiite cleric in the holy city of Najaf. "The death sentence will be implemented."

The Shiite premier has sought to reach out to the disaffected Sunni Arab minority, believed to be driving the insurgency, by including them in his new government announced April 28. But Sunnis are still underrepresented in Cabinet and the newly appointed committee tasked with drafting a new constitution by Aug. 15.

Returning from a one-day trip to meet Iraq's new leaders, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised the expanded role of Sunni Arabs and said she was confident the Iraqi government could meet important deadlines.

At the same time, she blamed Syria for complicating the new Iraqi government's efforts to quell violence. The U.S. military contends Iraq's remote desert region near Syria is a haven for foreign combatants who cross the frontier along ancient smuggling routes and collect weapons to use in some of Iraq's deadliest attacks. U.S. forces conducted a major campaign to clear the area last week.

After the two car bombs at the Baghdad market, a second blast targeted soldiers who rushed to help the victims of the first explosion.

Shop keepers piled the injured into pickup trucks to help get them to a hospital. Yarmouk Hospital treated 29 people injured in the blasts, one of whom died of his injuries.

Radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr also came out of hiding Monday for the first time since his fighters clashed with American forces in Najaf and Baghdad in August.

Al-Sadr held a news conference demanding that U.S.-led forces leave Iraq and Saddam Hussein be punished. "I want the immediate withdrawal of the occupation forces," he said.

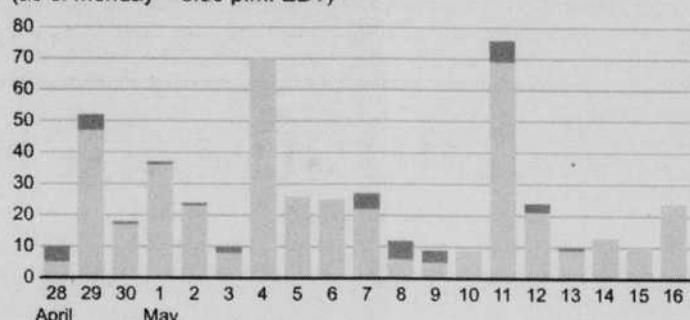
Nearly 500 Iraqis have been killed in a series of car bombings, ambushes and other insurgent attacks since Iraq's first democratically elected government was formed. In a grisly twist to the relentless violence, batches of bodies, many of them bound and blindfolded, turned up in several parts of the country over the past week.

Thirteen were found in a garbage-strewn lot in Baghdad's Shiite-dominated Sadr City slum, 11 more in an abandoned chicken farm south of the capital and 10 identified as Iraqi soldiers in the battleground city of Ramadi.

## Violence raising fears of civil war

Hundreds of people in Iraq, most of them civilians from the Shiite majority and their Kurdish allies now in power, have been killed by insurgents since Iraq's new government was formed April 28.

**Killed in insurgent violence** (as of Monday — 3:30 p.m. EDT)

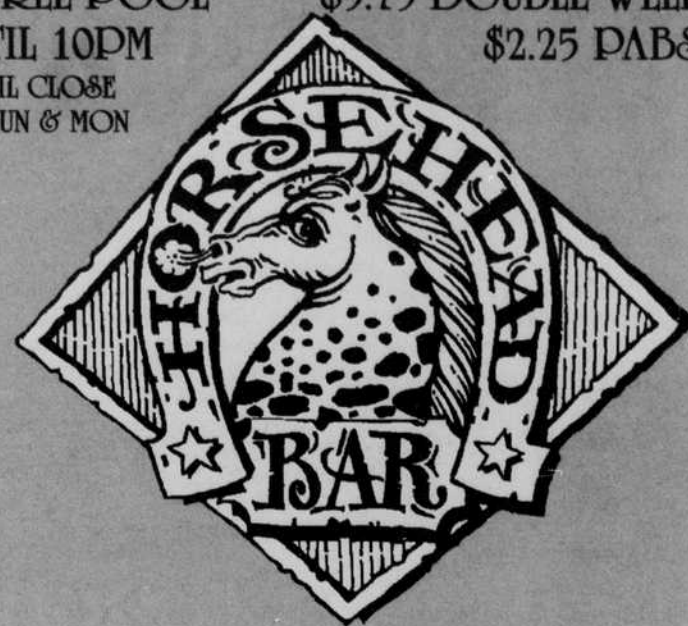


NOTE: Chart does not include British soldier killed on May 2 and two U.S. contractors killed on May 7.

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