

Militia rivals are worse than Qaeda: Maliki

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BAGHDAD: Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki raised the stakes in his five-day-old crackdown on Shia militants yesterday, describing his foes as “worse than Al Qaeda”.

The death toll rose as fighting raged in Basra and Baghdad, where US forces have been drawn deeper into a confrontation that started as an Iraqi initiative. US forces said they had killed 48 militants in air strikes and gun battles across the capital the previous day.



A fighter of the Mehdi Army fires his weapon in a street in Basra yesterday

At least 133 bodies and 647 wounded have been brought to five hospitals in the eastern half of Baghdad over five days of clashes, the head of the health directorate for eastern Baghdad, Ali Bustan, said. In Basra, government troops say they have killed 120 fighters. Scores of people have been reported killed in other towns across the south where fighting has spread.

“We used to talk about Al Qaeda. Unfortunately it seems there are some among us who are worse than Al Qaeda,” Maliki said in a televised meeting with tribal leaders in Basra, where he has personally overseen the crackdown since Tuesday. After years in which Iraq was torn apart by violence between Shias and Sunni Arab militants like Al Qaeda, the past week’s violence has exposed another bloody rift – among Shias themselves. Parties in Maliki’s government are battling followers of Sadr, who in many Shia areas rule the streets.

A Sadr aide said his representatives had made an overture to the reclusive Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shia authority, in a bid to end the violence. Maliki has announced he will fight the militants in Basra "until the end". He issued orders to his commanders in Baghdad to pursue militants in the capital with "no mercy".

But Mehdi Army fighters in black masks still control the streets of much of Iraq's second-biggest city, manning checkpoints and openly brandishing rifles, machineguns and rocket launchers, Reuters reporters in the town said. "We will fight on and never give up our weapons," Mehdi Army deputy military commander in Basra Abu Hassan al-Daraji said by telephone. "We will not turn over a single bullet."

Mehdi Army fighters clashed with government forces on the western outskirts of Karbala, one of Shia Islam's holiest cities. Iraqi commander Major-General Raad Jawdat said his forces had killed 21 "outlaws" and arrested 57 others. Washington has so far backed Maliki to the hilt. President George W Bush has called the crackdown a "defining moment in the history of a free Iraq".

But the spread of violence risks undoing a year of security improvements and jeopardising plans for US troops to withdraw. A curfew is in place in Baghdad, closing shops, businesses and schools. Residents are confined to their homes. Mortar bombs and rockets have caused havoc in the capital.

In Basra, the walls of one house were shattered and blood poured into a sewer. Grieving relatives said seven people had been killed in what they believed was an air strike. A spokesman for British forces said there were no air strikes yesterday but there had been earlier this week. The air strikes require US or British teams on the ground to direct them, indications that Western involvement has been growing in what so far has been an Iraqi-led operation. A main British force of 4,100 troops, which pulled out of Basra in December, has so far remained on a base outside. Sadr, who led two anti-US revolts in 2004, helped instal Maliki in power after an election in 2005 but broke with him last year. He declared a ceasefire last August that US commanders praised but has remained implacably anti-American.

In a rare interview taped just before this week's outbreak of violence, he told Al Jazeera television: "I call on the Arab League, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the UN to recognise the legitimacy of the resistance." Speaking of the meeting with Sistani, the Sadr aide, Salah al-Ubaidi, said Sistani had called for a peaceful solution.

Sistani almost never intervenes in politics. His views, if made public, would carry authority among Shias in Sadr's movement and in the political parties that support Maliki. A spokesman for Sistani in Beirut declined to say whether Sistani was involved in any initiative to stop the fighting. – Reuters