

The Australian

Baghdad erupts as ceasefire broken

ROCKET attacks against the Green Zone and a US military base in Baghdad killed three US soldiers and injured 31 today.

More than 20 people died in fresh clashes between the US military and the Shi'ite Mahdi Army in the volatile Sadr City enclave, despite a ceasefire declared last week.

The renewed violence came as the country's squabbling Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish factions rallied behind the Iraqi government's effort to confront the Mahdi Army militia, giving a boost to the beleaguered Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki.

The US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, and US ambassador Ryan Crocker are due to testify before Congress on Tuesday on progress in the Iraq war, and the fighting is certain to intensify the questioning as to whether their strategy is working.

Two of the US soldiers died when a rocket struck the heavily fortified Green Zone, which had been relatively calm since the ceasefire was declared last Sunday.

At least 17 others were injured in the mid-afternoon attack, a US military official said.

The third US soldier was killed and 14 were injured in a rocket attack at about the same time on the US military base at Rustamiyah in eastern Baghdad.

A fourth US soldier was killed in an unrelated roadside bombing in the troubled province of Diyala.

Although the intensity of Sunday's rocket fire was far lower than it had been during the peak of the fighting for Basra late last month, the casualty toll was unusually high.

Dozens of rockets slammed into the Green Zone during al-Maliki's recent offensive aimed at wresting control of the southern city of Basra from militias, but the attacks abated after a ceasefire brokered by Iran heralded an end to the worst of the fighting.

Two Americans, a civilian contractor and a government employee, died in the earlier attacks on the Green Zone, which the military has blamed on militias operating out of Sadr City, the Shi'ite slum neighborhood in northeastern Baghdad controlled by the Mahdi Army.

It was unclear what had triggered the latest eruption of fighting in Sadr City, which has been under curfew for the past 10 days.

Residents said US and Iraqi soldiers fought running battles with militiamen starting overnight Saturday.

Rockets apparently aimed at a US military checkpoint ignited a huge blaze at the usually crowded Jamila market, sending a plume of smoke billowing over the city.

The US military said it used Hellfire missiles launched by Apache attack helicopters to kill nine "criminals" who were seen firing rocket-propelled grenades at an Iraqi army checkpoint.

It was unclear whether they were among the 20 dead, which included some women and children, according to Iraqi hospital officials.

A spokesman for the Sadrist movement said the US military and Iraqi army had violated the terms of last week's ceasefire agreement by continuing to raid Mahdi Army strongholds even though Mahdi Army fighters are observing a ceasefire.

"There is no excuse or justification for this operation. The army of the Imam are sticking to the instructions of Sayed Muqtada al Sadr to return to civilian life," said Sadrist official Liwa Smeism.

A declaration of principles agreed late Saturday by all of Iraq's major factions suggested more violence lies ahead.

The Political Council for National Security, which groups all senior government and political leaders, issued a statement calling on all political parties to disband their militias if they want to contest provincial elections scheduled for October, laying down a challenge to the Mahdi Army to disarm or face a political ban.

The rare display of unity, in which Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish leaders pledged their support for al-Maliki, could help ease the political deadlock that has blocked progress on other key issues related to the broad U.S. goal of national reconciliation, such as a new oil law.

But it also raises the stakes in al-Maliki's effort to assert the Iraqi government's authority, which was found to be sorely lacking after the Basra offensive faltered and he was forced to accept a cease-fire that left the Mahdi Army largely intact.