

The Australian

Violence reduces Iraqi city to shell

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BAGHDAD: Fighting between Shia militiamen and US and Iraqi forces in Baghdad's sprawling Sadr City district raged yesterday, killing three people and wounding 36.

The fighting, which killed 20 people at the weekend, has brought the impoverished township of two million people to a standstill, with the main market burnt out, water in short supply and electricity non-existent.

The violence flared as the US ambassador to Iraq and the commander of American forces prepared to testify to Congress today on the security and political progress of the American surge of forces in the past year.

The clashes came just two days before a massive anti-American protest on Wednesday in Sadr City called by radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose Mahdi Army militia dominates the district.

The Sadr group expects at least a million protesters to attend the demonstration on the April 9 fifth anniversary of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime by US-led forces.

The clashes set ablaze the Jamila food market in Sadr City, one of the biggest in Iraq.

Shia militiamen, most of them loyal to Sadr, have been clashing with security forces since March 25, when Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ordered a crackdown on "lawless gunmen" in the southern city of Basra.

The fighting then spread to Sadr City in Baghdad and other Shia areas of Iraq, with at least 700 people killed countrywide since then.

US ambassador Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus will report to Congress on the security gains made by the deployment of about 30,000 extra US soldiers last year.

The improvement in daily life in the capital after years of horrific bloodshed is largely seen as a result of the US surge, as well as by Sunni insurgents turning away from al-Qa'ida to form US-backed militia groups in their own neighbourhoods.

A freeze on Mahdi Army militia called by Sadr has also helped. But the week-long battle between his militias and government forces appeared to undermine the freeze, especially after Mr Maliki's forces failed to crush the rogue fighters and had to agree on a peace deal.

However, Mr Maliki has sworn to fight on against what he terms criminals and appears to be rallying Iraqi politicians and ordinary civilians tired of the endless violence perpetrated by unaccountable militias.

Mr Crocker said that despite the poor result of the battles that spread across the Shia south during the Basra offensive - about 1500 Iraqi soldiers and police refused to fight - Mr Maliki's resolve had made a significant impression.

"We have always said that gains here are fragile. But in this instance, when the fighting in Iraq came about because the Government was taking on militias, I think the net result was a positive step forward for the Government," he said before leaving for Washington.

Parliament was also planning to isolate the Mahdi Army by drafting a bill banning parties that maintain militias from running for office. It was backed by a rare alliance of Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parties, although several of the parties involved run militias themselves.

Mr Maliki's main backer, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, has its own militia, the Badr Brigades, which has often fought the more powerful Mahdi Army. "We want the Sadrists to disband al-Mahdi Army. Just freezing it is no longer acceptable," a Maliki adviser said. "The new election law will prevent any party that has weapons or runs a militia from contesting elections."