

12 Iraqis die in fighting in Sadr city, and bombs kill 3 Americans

By James Glanz

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BAGHDAD: Fighting flared Wednesday across the Shiite enclave of Sadr City in eastern Baghdad, killing at least a dozen Iraqis, local officials said, while the United States military said three more American soldiers had died in Iraq in bomb attacks.

The battles in Sadr City began more than two weeks ago when Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki unleashed an assault on Shiite militiamen in the southern city of Basra that has been criticized as poorly planned. In the fighting on Wednesday, American and Iraqi government forces clashed with the Mahdi Army, founded by the radical Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr.

Sadr had originally chosen Wednesday for an enormous demonstration in Sadr City, his power base, but on Tuesday he postponed it as government forces tightened their control over the area and prevented people from entering Baghdad to join the march.

The fighting has driven a nationwide upsurge in violence as General David Petraeus, the top commander in Iraq, and Ryan Crocker, the American ambassador to Iraq, testified before Congress on the situation in Iraq. The general said Tuesday that "fragile and reversible" gains had been made since last fall.

Most of Wednesday's fighting was focused on the western and northern fringes of Sadr City, local officials said, and might have been aimed at gaining further control of sites used to launch deadly and highly embarrassing volleys of rockets into American and Iraqi government complexes in the Green Zone in Baghdad.

In his testimony on Tuesday, Petraeus said American forces had gained control of many of the places in Baghdad where he said Iranian-made 107-millimeter rockets were being fired. Although sporadic explosions could be heard in Baghdad on Wednesday, the city was generally quiet outside Sadr City under a curfew imposed the night before. The government-run Iraqiya television station said the curfew would end early Thursday morning.

An official at the Rashad Hospital in western Sadr City said that the Iraqi Army had pushed a Mahdi-infiltrated guard force out of the hospital and remained to protect patients and doctors.

The Associated Press reported Wednesday that an Iraqi judicial committee had ordered the release of one of the association's photographers, Bilal Hussein. He has been held since the United States military detained him nearly two years ago and accused him of activities related to terrorism. Since then, the military has repeatedly said that Hussein, who shared a Pulitzer Prize in 2005, was involved in such activities.

Under a recently passed amnesty law, however, the judicial committee ordered Iraqi courts to stop all legal proceedings against Hussein, an Iraqi, and to release him immediately unless he faced other charges, The Associated Press reported.

Tom Curley, president of The Associated Press, called on the military to act swiftly.

"The military must finally do the right thing by ending its detention of a journalist who did nothing more than his job," Curley said in a statement. "Bilal's imprisonment stands as a sad black mark on American values of justice and fairness."

Organizations that serve as advocates for the rights of Iraqi journalists, who work under extremely dangerous conditions, have often accused the United States military of detaining Iraqis on trumped-up charges when they are photographing or reporting on events that government officials would prefer not be seen.

One of those groups, the Committee to Protect Journalists, said Wednesday in a statement that over the past four years, it had documented eight cases in which Iraqi journalists had been held by the United States military for weeks or months before being released without having been charged.

"The detention of Bilal Hussein has been a terrible injustice, and we are relieved that his ordeal might finally come to an end after nearly two years behind bars," said Joel Simon, executive director of the committee.

The United States military said Wednesday that five more American soldiers had died but that two of the deaths were not related to combat. The military's statement on the losses said that three soldiers had been killed by "improvised explosive device" attacks, generally meaning roadside bombs. One of the deaths occurred in northeastern Baghdad, one east of the capital and one in Salahuddin Province.