

Radical cleric Sadr snubs Iraq peace overtures

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People grieve over the caskets of their relatives in Sadr City. Hardline Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has refused to hold talks with Iraqi lawmakers who had gone to Iran in a bid to end the clashes between his fighters and troops, an aide has told AFP. (AFP Ahmad al-Rubaye)

NAJAF, Iraq (AFP) Hardline Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr on Thursday refused talks with Iraqi lawmakers visiting neighbouring Iran in a bid to end clashes between his fighters and troops, an aide told AFP.

"Moqtada al-Sadr did not permit his leaders to meet the Iraqi delegation," said Sheikh Salah al-Obeidi, the cleric's spokesman in the central holy city of Najaf.

"Sadr insists that the crisis can be solved only through a parliamentary initiative backed by President Jalal Talabani and speaker Mahmud Mashhadani."

Obeidi did not elaborate, but Talabani has been holding talks with Sadrists to resolve the crisis.

Earlier, Obeidi said that Iraqi Shiite MPs travelled to Iran for talks with Sadr, in the first acknowledgement that the cleric was in Iran. It was unclear however if Sadr was in Tehran or the holy Iranian city of Qom.

The commander of US forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus, gave his backing to Baghdad's efforts to broker a deal with the radical cleric and renewed US concern over Iran's role in Iraq.

Speaking Thursday after an hour-long meeting with British Premier Gordon Brown in London, Petraeus said there was widespread concern about Iranian backing for attacks against the coalition in Iraq, despite Iran's denials.

The Shia-led Iraqi government "has very rightly" sent a delegation to try to end clashes between coalition troops and fighters loyal to Sadr who have been "armed, trained and equipped" by Iran, he said.

"The important focus has to be on the way ahead and Iran truly wanting its neighbour to the west... a fellow Shia-led government, to succeed, so there can be a constructive relationship," Petraeus said.

"I think it's very important to recognise that the Sadr trend, as a political movement, has every reason to be engaged in the political spectrum, in the political arena, in Iraq.

"It represents an important constituency in the citizenry of Iraq."

Shiite militiamen, mainly from Sadr's Mahdi Army, have fought fierce street battles with US and Iraqi forces since late March in Baghdad's Sadr City, the cleric's bastion in the capital.

The firefights fuelled the overall bloodshed in April, with at least 1,073 people killed across the country at a time when the US military's toll also hit a seven-month high.

Overnight clashes in Sadr City between the Americans and Shiite militiamen left another eight people dead, including two children, officials said. The military said it killed eight militants.

According to data collected by the interior, health and defence ministries and made available to AFP, 966 civilians were killed in April, as were 69 police officers and 38 soldiers.

April's toll was marginally lower than the 1,082 in March.

Combined figures obtained by AFP from the three ministries showed that 1,745 civilians, 159 policemen and 104 soldiers were wounded in April.

The April toll maintains the trend of rising violence that in March reversed a gradual decline seen from last June. It follows 721 killed in February, 541 in January, 568 in December, 606 in November, 887 in October, 917 in September and 1,856 in August.

April was also the deadliest month for the US military since last September.

Fifty-one troops were killed in April, according to independent website www.icasualties.org based on the deaths already announced by the military.

These brought to 4,063 the number of US troops killed since the March 2003 invasion.

Twenty-three of the American soldiers killed in April died in the Baghdad battles with Shiite militiamen.

The fighting between security forces and Shiite fighters erupted in the southern city of Basra on March 25, and spread quickly to other Shiite areas of Iraq, particularly Sadr City.

On Thursday, US Lieutenant Colonel Steven Stover said troops "positively identified" militiamen and killed eight in separate incidents overnight.

In a separate statement, the military said it also killed a known "Iranian-sponsored Special Groups leader" in an air strike in Sadr City on Thursday.

A car bomb blew up in central Baghdad on Thursday as a US military patrol passed, killing at least eight people and wounding 21, security officials said. A US armoured car was badly damaged, witnesses said.

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