

Militants withdraw from streets of Sadr City

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BAGHDAD: Militants were withdrawing from the streets and shops were reopening in the Sadr City district of Baghdad on the first day of a cease-fire between Shiite extremists and U.S.-backed Iraqi forces, after two months of intense clashes.

The authorities reported no violence Sunday.

"Today, people are very happy and very optimistic," said Sadiq Jaafar, 30. "Last night for the first time in more than 40 days we were able to sleep without being woken up by explosions or gunfire."

American military officials said at a news conference Sunday that the Iraqi government was still working out details of the truce with elements of the movement of the anti-American cleric Moktada al-Sadr.

"It is important to emphasize that it is an ongoing dialogue process," said a U.S. military spokesman, Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll. "It is premature to say there is an agreed-to truce."

The U.S. military has repeatedly said that the clashes are being carried out by rogue elements and groups that have splintered from Sadr's Mahdi army.

There was no immediate comment Sunday from the Iraqi government, and its spokesman was unavailable. But the government has said it retains the right to pursue wanted militants and search houses in order to confiscate weapons.

Thousands of civilians have fled their homes in Sadr City, a slum that is home to nearly 40 percent of Baghdad's population - and aid groups said some areas were desperately short of food and medicine after seven weeks of street battles.

Followers of Sadr, who was apparently instrumental in brokering the cease-fire, distributed food in the neighborhood Sunday, residents said.

The bulk of Sadr's 60,000-strong Mahdi army is not believed to have participated in the clashes, instead adhering to a cease-fire ordered by Sadr last August. Splinter groups believed to be acting on their own have been blamed for the violence. Sadr has directed his supporters to only fight when attacked.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has called on Sadr to disband the Mahdi army and vowed to disarm its members.

"We have concerns about this agreement," a senior commander of the Mahdi army, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons, said Sunday. "When U.S.-led forces enter the area, we fear that they will pursue us."

The commander spoke by telephone from the most troubled southern part of Sadr City, where American and Iraqi forces are building a barrier up to 3.5 meters, or 12 feet, high to isolate the sector and disrupt supply and escape routes for militants.

During the clashes, Shiite extremists fired rockets or mortars from the area toward the heavily fortified Green Zone, housing the U.S. Embassy and much of the Iraqi government offices. They often fell short, killing or wounding civilians in central Baghdad.

The conflict flared in late March after Maliki ordered a crackdown on armed Shiite factions in the southern city of Basra, the country's second-largest urban area. Mahdi fighters then rose up in Basra and Sadr City.

Meanwhile on Sunday, the U.S. military said four people, including a woman and a child, had been killed the day before in an operation against Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia near the northern city of Mosul.

The military said it regretted killing civilians in the operation against what it described as associates of foreign Qaeda fighters. The woman and the child were riding in the same vehicle with gunmen, it said.

A police official said Sunday that about 140 people had been arrested and 120 bombs seized in one house during an operation that began Saturday against Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia in the northern city of Mosul.