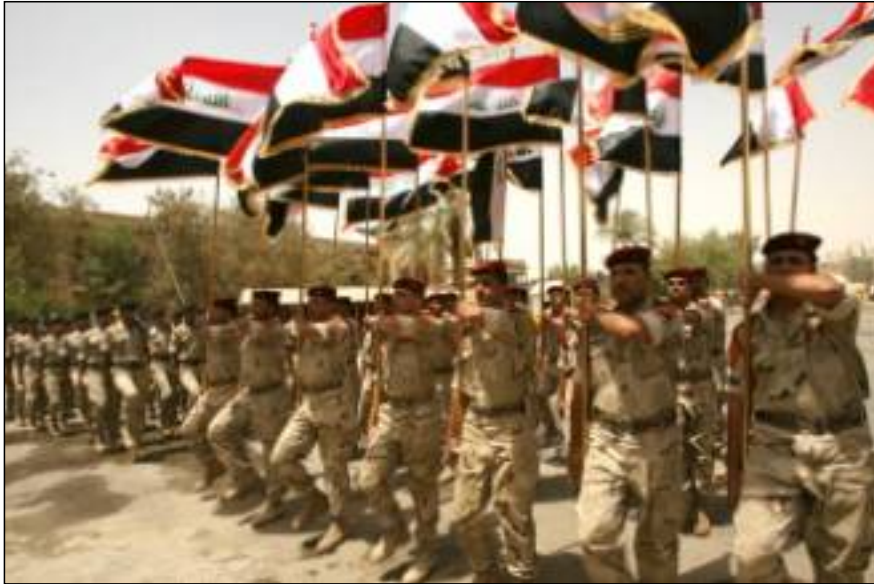


Tuesday, 30 June 2009

Kirkuk rocked by bomb as Iraq takes control of cities Car bomb kills 26 Iraqis as US troops pullout



Iraqi soldiers parade in the grounds of the old Iraqi Defense Ministry

BAGHDAD (Agencies)

Twenty-six people were killed and 56 wounded in a car bomb attack on a market area in Kirkuk on Tuesday as Iraqi forces prepared to take control of towns and cities nationwide as American troops withdrew six years after the U.S.-led invasion.

The blast occurred around 6 p.m. (1500 GMT) in the central Shurga district, an interior ministry official said separately. The blast devastated the area, an AFP reporter at the scene added.

Kirkuk, north of Baghdad, is plagued with intercommunal tensions among its 900,000-strong Kurdish, Turkmen and Arab population.

But earlier in the day Baghdad's streets were quiet and traffic much lighter than usual as people stayed at home for a national holiday to mark the June 30 pullback, ahead of a complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Iraqis celebrated into the night but soldiers and police were out in force to prevent insurgent groups spoiling the party as American troops quit their posts in urban centers.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani marked the security handover by thanking U.S. forces for the sacrifices they made in overthrowing now executed dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, and in the years of violence that followed.

"They bore the burden and dangers against the most cruel regime and against the mutual enemy -- the terror," Talabani said on state television.

The U.S. army announced that four of its soldiers died from combat-related on Monday, taking to 4,321

the number of U.S. soldiers killed since the invasion.

The pullout is part of a landmark security agreement signed last year between Baghdad and Washington covering the fate of the some 133,000 U.S. troops still in Iraq.

Party time

Security was tight in the wake of several massive bombings that have killed more than 200 people this month alone.

It was a landmark celebrated by huge crowds of revelers in Baghdad's largest park on Monday evening.

Popular Iraqi singers including Salah Hassan, Kassem Sultan and Abed Falek, who all live abroad, returned home for the celebration.

"Since 2003, I have never been to a party but today I am coming to hear the singers I love," Ahmed Ali, 20, told AFP.

Revelers had to undergo three security checks to enter the park but no one seemed to complain amid a jubilant atmosphere, where an onstage banner declared that Baghdad's sovereignty and independence had been recovered.

Even policemen joined in the fun, dancing with the party-goers.

"Today is the day that we got back our country," said Salim Mohammed, from the sprawling Shiite working-class district of Sadr City.

Truck bomb intercepted

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki warned earlier this month that insurgent groups and militias were likely to step up attacks in the run-up to June 30 in a bid to undermine confidence in Iraq's own security forces.

There have been several large bombings since, the deadliest near the northern oil hub of Kirkuk on June 20, when a truck loaded with explosives was detonated, leaving 72 people dead and more than 200 wounded.

A source close to Iraq's counter-terrorism office revealed on Monday that a truck loaded with 64 mortar rounds believed intended for use in sabotaging the pullout had been intercepted in Baghdad after successfully negotiating 11 roadblocks.

But Maliki and senior government officials have insisted that Iraq's 750,000 soldiers and police can defend the nation against attacks.

Only a small number of U.S. forces in training and advisory roles will remain in urban areas, with the bulk of American troops in Iraq quartered elsewhere.