

Saturday, 27 April 2013

Iraq's Maliki points to Syria over deadly sectarian unrest



Sectarian strife has returned to Iraq from elsewhere in the region, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said on Saturday, in a likely reference to war-torn Syria.

A civil war pitting mainly Sunni Muslim rebels against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, has killed more than 70,000 people. Sectarian strife "came back to Iraq because it began in another place in this region," Maliki said in televised remarks, an allusion to Sunni-Shiite violence that peaked in 2006 and 2006 and claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Earlier on Saturday, gunmen killed five army intelligence soldiers in two attacks west of Baghdad while others shot dead five anti-Qaeda militiamen north of the Iraqi capital, police and doctors said. One group of soldiers were driving near the site of a long-running anti-government protest when they were stopped by gunmen. They shot one of the gunmen, wounding him, and clashes broke out in which four of the soldiers were killed and another wounded, a police lieutenant colonel and a doctor told AFP news agency. Gunmen also killed one soldier and wounded another in a similar incident involving a second vehicle in the same area, the same sources said. And gunmen killed five Sahwa anti-Qaeda militiamen in an attack, on a checkpoint south of Tikrit, which lies north of the Iraqi capital, a second police lieutenant colonel and a doctor said. The incidents come amid a wave of violence that began on Tuesday when security forces moved in against anti-government protesters near the Sunni Arab northern town of Hawijah, sparking clashes that left 53 people dead. Subsequent unrest, much but not all of it apparently linked to the Hawijah clashes, killed dozens more people and brought the death toll to over 200 by Saturday. United Nations envoy Martin Kobler warned on Friday that Iraq is at a "crossroads," calling for restraint as a wave of violence has killed more than 190 people in four days.

"I call on the conscience of all religious and political leaders not to let anger win over peace, and to use their wisdom, because the country is at a crossroads," AFP reported Kobler as saying in a statement.

Maliki, from Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, called on people "to take the initiative, and not be silent about those who want to take the country back to sectarian civil war."

Maliki's statement came as residents of a number of Sunni cities in Iraq have announced on Thursday the formation of "military forces" to counter attack the Iraqi army and its crackdown against protesters calling for Maliki –a Shiite –to step down, Al Arabiya's correspondent said.

The newly formed anti-government tribal army in the western Sunni province of Anbar was deployed in a protest square in Ramadi city after the withdrawal of the Iraqi army, Al Arabiya reported on Friday.

The country was torn by Sunni-Shiite fighting in 2007-2008 in which thousands of people were killed each month.