

Iraq's Shias targeted in wave of attacks

Bombs targeting Shi'ite pilgrims in Baghdad and police in southern Iraq killed at least 63 people on Wednesday in a wave of attacks during a major religious festival, police and hospital sources said.



Iraqis inspect the site of a car bomb in central Baghdad Photo: SABAH ARAR/AFP/Getty Images

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The bloodshed was a stark reminder of the political tensions threatening to provoke a new round of sectarian violence that once pushed Iraq to the brink of civil war. The pilgrims were headed to the northern Baghdad neighborhood of Kazimiyah to mark the anniversary of the death of a revered Shiite saint who is interred there.

The first bomb struck a procession at around 5 a.m. in the town of Taji, north of Baghdad, killing seven people and wounding 2, two police officers said.

That was followed by four more morning blasts that hit other groups of pilgrims across the capital, killing 25 people and wounding more than 70, according to police and health officials.

South of Baghdad, two car bombs exploded minutes apart at dawn in the center of the city of Hillah, killing 21 people and wounding 53, according to two police officers and one health worker.

A parked car bomb also exploded near a group of pilgrims in the Shiite holy city of Karbala, 90 kilometers (55 miles) south of Baghdad, at about 8 a.m., killing two people and wounding 22 others, a police official and health official said.

Two nearly simultaneous car bombs also killed seven pilgrims and wounded 34 in the Shiite town of Balad, 80 kilometers (50 miles) north of Baghdad, a police official and health official said.

All the officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorised to release the information.

Another person was killed in the northern city of Kirkuk when three more bombs exploded, one of them outside the political office of a prominent ethnic Kurdish leader.

The attacks were the third this week targeting the annual pilgrimage that sees hundreds of thousands of Shiites converge on Baghdad on foot to commemorate the 8th century death of revered Imam Moussa al-Kadhim.

Baghdad military command spokesman Col. Dhia al-Wakeel said Wednesday's attacks meant to reignite all-out sectarian bloodshed, "but Iraqis are fully aware of the terrorism agenda and will not slip into a sectarian conflict."

Nobody immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks but they bore the hallmarks of Sunni insurgents who frequently target Shiite pilgrimages in Iraq.

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