

International

Death toll rises to 19 as Iraq protests spread across south

Iraqis rally against corruption and unemployment

BAGHDAD: The death toll from mass rallies in Iraq against corruption and unemployment rose to 19 yesterday, as the leaderless protest movement spread to virtually all of the south. Braving live fire, tear gas and local curfews, Iraqis flooded the streets for a third day in the biggest challenge yet to Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi.

The embattled premier ordered a ban on all movement across the capital starting at 5:00 am (0200 GMT), but dozens of protesters defied the order and gathered in Baghdad's emblematic Tahrir (Liberation) Square. "We slept here so the police don't take the place," one demonstrator told AFP before riot police fired into the air in a bid to disperse them.

The protests began in Baghdad on Tuesday but have since spread to cities across the mainly Shiite south. Yesterday, medics and security sources told AFP that four protesters were shot dead in the southern city of Amarah, another in the province of Dhi Qar and a sixth in Nasiriyah. The deaths bring the overall toll from three days of demonstrations to 19, including one police officer, a figure confirmed by Iraq's Human Rights Commission. Nearly 800 protesters and security personnel have been wounded.

Tensions have been exacerbated by a near-total internet blackout, the closure of government offices in Baghdad and calls by firebrand cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr for "a general strike." Before dawn twin explosions hit the Green Zone, where some ministries and embassies are located and which was struck by two rockets last week, a security source in the area said. The apparent attack came hours after security

Deadly civil unrest: What is happening in troubled Iraq?

BAGHDAD: At least 18 Iraqis have died in recent days in clashes between protesters and the security forces during street demonstrations that caught the authorities by surprise. They were the first major deadly protests for more than a year.

Why are people protesting?

Iraqis are fed up. Two years after the defeat of Islamic State much of the country's nearly 40 million population live in worsening conditions despite the country's oil wealth. Security is better than it has been in years, but wrecked infrastructure has not been rebuilt and jobs are scarce. Youth blame this squarely on what they see as corrupt leaders who do not represent them.

Why are conditions so bad?

After decades of war against its neighbors, UN sanctions, two US invasions, foreign occupation and sectarian civil war, the defeat of the Islamic State insurgency in 2017 means Iraq is now at peace and free to trade for the first extended period since the 1970s. Oil output is at record levels. But infrastructure is decrepit and deteriorating, war-damaged cities have yet to be

forces sealed off the compound "until further notice" just a few months after reopening it to the public, fearing angry protesters would overrun it.

Iraq 'largely offline'

In the city of Kut, two protesters were killed overnight after they tried to storm a local government office, medics and security sources said. Another two demonstrators died further south in Nasiriyah, scene of the deadliest violence so far. Riot police have used water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and live rounds in an attempt to force protesters away from main squares or government buildings. The worst violence has taken place at night and Iraqis have braced themselves for larger gatherings once darkness falls yesterday. The previous evening in Baghdad, marches from different neighborhoods attempted to converge on Tahrir Square. But with internet access virtually shut off, demonstrators have struggled to communicate with each other or post footage of the latest clashes. Approximately 75 percent of Iraq is "offline" after major network operators "intentionally restricted" access, according to cybersecurity monitor Net-Blocks. In the Shiite holy city of Najaf and in Nasiriyah on Wednesday, security forces fired on protesters and announced curfews.

The protests appear to be largely spontaneous so far, with angry crowds carrying Iraqi flags and shunning any involvement by the country's main political players. Many traditional figures have expressed their support for the movement, with Sadr urging "peaceful demonstrations." He was behind

rebuilt and armed groups still wield power on the streets. A culture of corruption has persisted since the era of dictator Saddam Hussein and has become entrenched under the rule of sectarian political parties that emerged after his fall.

What sparked the protests?

The protests do not appear to be coordinated by a particular political group. Social media calls for protests gathered pace early this week. The turnout appeared to take security forces by surprise. The inadequacy of state services and the lack of jobs are the principal reasons for public anger. A series of political moves by the government has contributed, especially the demotion of a popular wartime military officer for reasons that have not been fully explained. Some at the demonstrations were protesting over the commander's removal.

Are mass protests rare in Iraq?

Major protests took place mainly in the southern city of Basra in September last year. Nearly 30 people were killed. Since then, sporadic demonstrations have taken place but not on the scale of this week's events. These were the first large demonstrations against Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's government, which took office in October last year.

What are the risks?

It depends how the government and security services handle the protests. More deaths - so far 18 people including a policeman have been



BAGHDAD: Youths carry away a protester injured during clashes with riot police amidst demonstrations against state corruption, failing public services, and unemployment, in the Iraqi capital Baghdad's central Tahrir Square yesterday. —AFP

the last round of major protests in Baghdad in 2016, when his supporters stormed the Green Zone, but his involvement appears much more limited this time.

On Wednesday night, the top United Nations official in Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, met with some protesters in Baghdad to call for "direct dialogue" between them and government officials. "The ability to preserve the right to protest is a sign of political and democratic maturity. Moreover, the use of force only fuels the anger," she said in a statement. "De-escalation is urgently needed." —AFP

killed - will fuel anger. But a heavy-handed crackdown could also scare protesters into staying home. Many Iraqis believe powerful paramilitary groups backed by Iran were behind violent crackdowns in Basra last year. Turnout for protests since then has been small. If tribal or factional armed groups get involved the situation could deteriorate. Gunfights broke out in southern cities this week between unidentified gunmen and police.

Will government meet demands?

The government has promised better employment opportunities for Iraqis. This week Abdul Mahdi promised jobs for graduates and instructed the oil ministry and other government bodies to include a 50% quota for local workers in subsequent contracts with foreign companies. Similar promises and pledges to improve healthcare, electricity and services were made last year by the previous government.

Is the unrest sectarian?

No. Most Iraqis have sought to avoid sectarian rhetoric after the brutal experience of Sunni hardline Islamic State - although sectarian tension still exists. These protests are about worsening economic and living conditions and are taking place mostly in Baghdad and the Shiite Muslim-dominated south, but cut across ethnic and sectarian lines. Anger is directed at a political class, not a sect. That contrasts with protests in 2012 and 2013 that Islamic State exploited to rally support among Sunnis. —Reuters

Protest movements in Iraq since 2015

BAGHDAD: A snapshot of the main protest movements since 2015 in Iraq, where two days of popular protests by thousands against state corruption, failing public services and unemployment have turned deadly.

Anger

In August 2015, protests at the poor quality of water and electricity supply spread across the country. Thousands of people gather in central Baghdad and the south, accusing the government of corruption and incompetence in public services. Later in the month, powerful Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr calls on his supporters to join the demonstrations. Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi, backed by the top Shiite religious authority in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, announces a series of reforms, which are slow in materializing.

Sit-in

On February 26, 2016, tens of thousands of Sadr's supporters rally in central Baghdad. He demands the government carry out serious reforms. On March 18, Sadr supporters launch a two-week sit-in at the main gates of Baghdad's fortified Green Zone, home to most key institutions, including the prime minister's office, parliament and embassies. On the 27th, Sadr enters the Zone to step up pressure on the government. In April, thousands of protesters break into the Green Zone and storm parliament for several hours. On May 20, Sadr supporters briefly storm the prime minister's office in the Zone. In mid-September, thousands of Sadr supporters again demonstrate in Baghdad to call for reforms. —AFP