



Afghan generation knows only conflict as war turns 18

Where are the world's stateless people?

Page 9

Page 9



BAGHDAD: Iraqi protesters burn tyres during a demonstration against state corruption, failing public services, and unemployment, in the Iraqi capital Baghdad. —AFP

# Iraq unrest hits volatile Sadr City

Death toll climbs; protesters want PM, government removed

**BAGHDAD:** At least 15 people were killed in clashes between Iraqi security forces and protesters overnight in Baghdad's Sadr City district as violence from a week-long nationwide uprising swept through the vast, poor swathe of the capital for the first time. At least 110 people have been killed across Iraq in the worst wave of violence since the defeat of Islamic State nearly two years ago, with protesters demanding the removal of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and a government they accuse of corruption.

The arrival of the violence in Sadr City on Sunday night poses a new security challenge for the authorities. Unrest is historically difficult to put down in the volatile district, where about a third of Baghdad's 8 million people live in narrow alleys, many with little access to electricity, water and jobs. The military said early it was withdrawing from Sadr city and handing over to police in an apparent effort to de-escalate tension there. A Sadr City resident reached by phone told Reuters later on that the streets were again calm after a night of riots. Local militiamen were coming to inspect damage and police were deployed around the district's neighborhoods. The protests began spontaneously last week in Baghdad and across southern cities, without public support from any major political faction in Iraq.

They have since escalated and grown more violent, spreading from cities in the south to other areas, mainly populated by members of

the Shiite majority whose parties hold political power but say their communities have been neglected for decades. The unrest poses an unprecedented challenge for Abdul Mahdi, who took office last year as a consensus candidate of powerful Shiite religious parties that have dominated the country since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

**Reform promises**

Abdul Mahdi has responded with proposals of incremental reforms, but these have failed to appease the protesters, who say the security forces are using snipers and live ammunition to protect the political class from popular anger. It is the biggest wave of violence in the country since an insurgency by the Sunni Muslim Islamist group Islamic State was put down in the north in 2017, and the worst street unrest to hit the capital Baghdad in around a decade. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Abdul Mahdi in a phone call that he trusted the Iraqi forces and supported the Iraqi government in restoring its security, a statement from the prime minister's office said.

Abdul Mahdi said life had returned to normal, according to the statement. The government has offered to spend more money on subsidized housing for the poor, stipends for the unemployed and training programs and loan initiatives for youth. Iraqi authorities also said they would hold to account members of the security forces who "acted wrongly" in the



BAGHDAD: An ambulance arrives at a demonstration against state corruption in the Iraqi capital Baghdad. —AFP

crackdown on protests, state TV reported. The interior ministry denies government forces have shot directly at protesters. The protesters demand the overhaul of what they say is an entire corrupt system and political class that has held the country back, despite unprecedented levels of security since the end of the war against IS. Many protesters also accuse the

parties in power of having close ties to Iran, the dominant Shiite power in the region. Iran has called for calm in Iraq. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, tweeted yesterday: "#Iran and #Iraq are two nations whose hearts & souls are tied together... Enemies seek to sow discord but they've failed & their conspiracy won't be effective." —Reuters

## 'Silencing' of Iraq protests coverage feared after attacks

**BAGHDAD:** A spree of attacks and threats against media outlets in Iraq has alarmed the United Nations, journalists and monitors, who demand the government prevents the "silencing" of journalists covering mass protests. Raids over the weekend carried out by unidentified gunmen have added to concerns for freedom of expression that were first flagged when authorities implemented a near-total internet blackout after anti-government protests erupted last week in the capital and the country's south.

On Saturday evening, the Baghdad bureaus of Kurdistan-based NRT TV, Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya and local Al-Dijla channel were raided by masked men, the stations said. NRT TV said the gunmen damaged equipment, which temporarily put the chan-

nel off the air, seized employees' phones and attacked local police.

Security camera footage aired by Al-Arabiya showed around a dozen men in tactical gear and helmets entering the bureau, ripping screens off walls and rummaging through drawers. Al-Arabiya said it had received "assurances" from Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi's office that the incident would be investigated. The UN's top official in Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, said she was "shocked at the vandalism (and) intimidation". "Government efforts (are) required to protect journalists. Free media is the best safeguard of a strong democracy," she said.

A security source told AFP that another local channel, Al-Nahrein, had also been raided and its equipment damaged, and that Hona Baghdad (This is Baghdad) and Al-Rasheed had received threats. "We received direct threats over our coverage of the protests," said a journalist at Al-Rasheed, which has closely covered protests and accused security forces of indiscriminate violence. "They told us: 'Either you change your editorial line or you'll have the same fate as NRT and the rest.' So we preferred to cut our dis-

tribution," the reporter added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

**Bid to 'terrorize' media**

Throughout the week, bloggers and activists across the south also reported receiving text messages and phone calls threatening them and their families over their coverage. "Coverage of demonstrations is very difficult and different from the usual coverage of events because the crackdown on protesters automatically affects the journalists," Dijlah TV's Mazen Alwan told Iraq's National Union of Journalists.

Various media outlets also took confidential measures to ensure the safety of their teams. Iraq is ranked 156th out of 180 countries on the 2019 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The media watchdog accused security forces of "disproportionate and unwarranted restriction of the right to inform". "Instead of banning all journalistic activities, the security forces and local authorities have a duty to guarantee the safety of journalists so that they can do their reporting," said Sabrina Bennoui, RSF's Middle East desk head. —AFP

## N Korea boat collides with Japan sea patrol

**TOKYO:** Around 60 members of a North Korean fishing boat were rescued yesterday after it sank following a collision with a Japanese patrol vessel, local media said. The North Korean ship—believed to illegally fishing in Japanese waters—capsized after the collision, the coast guard said. Satoshi Kuwahara, a Japanese fisheries agency official, told reporters the patrol boat Okuni had earlier warned the North Korean vessel to leave the area.

All of the estimated 60 crew members aboard the North Korean boat, were rescued. Jiji Press said, while public broadcaster NHK added they had been transferred to another North Korean vessel sailing nearby. Local media said none of the Japanese patrol vessel crew were injured. Immediate confirmation of the news reports was not available. The collision occurred in waters some 350 kilometers northwest of Noto peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture in central Japan. "We've been strengthening patrols around the water there in cooperation with the fisheries agency," said Kazuma Nohara, another coast-guard spokesman. In the wake of the accident, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told parliament: "We will continue taking resolute action to prevent illegal operations by foreign ships." Experts say some fishermen from the North are travelling far out to sea in order to satisfy government mandates for bigger catches.

But their old and poorly equipped vessels are prone to mechanical faults and other problems, including running out of fuel, and there are few ways for them to call for rescue. A record 225 suspected North Korean fishing vessels washed up on Japan's coast last year, according to the coastguard. Boats have also washed up on Japanese shores with the crew dead—referred to as "ghost ships" by local media. In 2018, 10 North Koreans rescued from a tiny wooden boat drifting off northern Japan were deported back to their country. —AFP