

# Coordinated attack targets hotel for journalists, contractors

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## Period of relative calm in Baghdad ends as 16 killed

By Jonathan Finan and Omar Fekeiki, Washington Post | October 25, 2005

BAGHDAD -- Insurgents yesterday launched a complex and coordinated attack -- including rockets, small-arms fire and at least three suicide bombs -- on a fortified hotel complex used by foreign journalists and contractors, killing at least 16 people and wounding 22, according to government officials, police and witnesses.

The assault began about 5:30 p.m. when a car detonated near an Interior Ministry office behind a mosque on Firdaus Square, where a large statue of former president Saddam Hussein was toppled at the close of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

Moments later, a second car bomb exploded nearby beside a concrete barrier about 50 yards from the Palestine Hotel, blowing a large hole in the protective wall. A cement truck then drove through the breach and exploded, sending a billowing cloud of smoke into the sky.

Police fired shots into the air to enforce a cordon around the area, while ambulances and SUVs from private security companies rushed victims to the neighborhood's Ibn-Nafees Hospital.

The attack ended a period of relative calm in Baghdad that began in the days leading up to Iraq's Oct. 15 constitutional referendum. The bombs exploded as restaurants nearby were packed with patrons gathered to break the daily fast of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

The group, which called itself the Lions of Braa Bin Malik, said the attack "killed the manager of the largest security company working in Iraq" as well as "a number of foreigners."

Among the tallest buildings in Baghdad's skyline, the Palestine and Sheraton hotels have been frequent targets of attacks. On April 8, 2003, during the US-led invasion, an American tank shelled the Palestine, killing two journalists there. The buildings were repeatedly hit by rockets and mortar shells last year, but had not been attacked in recent months.

Journalists in the hotel described a string of huge explosions that devastated the ground level and blew out windows several floors up. "The lobby of the hotel is completely trashed. I found pieces of the cement mixer 150 meters away from where it exploded," said one Western journalist staying at the Palestine, who said his company had asked him not to detail his location for publication. "Even by the standard of Baghdad car bombs, this was a large one."

Elsewhere in Iraq, the military announced a Marine died Sunday in a firefight in Ramadi.

South of Baghdad, police found the bodies of 18 people who had been shot dead. Twelve of them, discovered in the town of Musayyib, were laborers killed by gunmen driving a black BMW, according to police Captain Muthanna Ahmed. Six others were found in Iskandariyah, about 30 miles south of the capital, he said.

Al Qaeda in Iraq called yesterday for the killing of three prominent Sunni Arab sheiks in the insurgent stronghold of Anbar province, accusing them of working with the US military there. A rift has emerged in recent months between some Iraqi Sunnis, who are believed to make up the bulk of the insurgency, and Al Qaeda in Iraq, which is led by Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and thought to be dominated by foreign fighters. ■

Early reports suggested most of the casualties were Iraqi civilians who were eating in restaurants outside the barrier walls or walking in the streets.

Saleh Mehdi, 40, a laborer who was with a friend at the Chicken Inn restaurant across the street from the complex, said patrons were knocked to the ground by the blasts. "There was broken glass and shrapnel, and all of the furniture was turned over," he said. "I ran out into the street to escape, and then the second explosion happened. The whole area turned into a battlefield."

Three staff members from Associated Press Television News were wounded, two with head injuries, though none was seriously hurt, according to Rob Celliers, a senior producer. A total of six people inside the compound were wounded, the AP reported.

Iraq's national security adviser, Mouwafak al-Rubaie, said five to 10 men had carried out the attack and journalists were the target.

"This was an attempt to break into the Palestine Hotel and occupy it to take Arab and foreign journalists hostage. Regretfully, this terrorist attack resulted in many civilian casualties," he told the al-Arabiya television network.

Rubaie praised Iraqi police and security companies for helping to thwart the attack.

No American service members were killed or wounded in the assault, which also included rocket fire, according to a US military statement. An American soldier stationed at the site fired at the oncoming cement truck, helping to disable it, the statement said.

In leaflets distributed by masked gunmen in the western city of Ramadi, an insurgent unit affiliated with the organization Al Qaeda in Iraq asserted responsibility for the attack, saying it had struck "the base of blasphemy, crusaders and infidels."