

Over 300,000 join Baqir's funeral

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with the blast. However, many Shiites blame the cleric's death on Saddam loyalists and the US-led coalition, which they say has failed to provide adequate security in the country since the dictator's fall.

In Najaf, Maj. Rick Hall, spokesman for the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines said the death toll now stood at 125 with 142 wounded, some seriously. He also said the Marine hand-over of the territory this week to an international force led by Poland had been put on hold indefinitely. "We now want to stay here and assist as much as possible," Hall said.

He said US forces had two men in custody that were handed to them by Iraqi authorities. "We are questioning them, but we are leaning toward releasing them," Hall said, adding that the involvement of al-Qaeda members in the Friday explosion was "an option we are looking at."

Hall denied reports that the Marines would patrol around the Imam Ali shrine, citing Islamic sensitivities to having non-Muslims in or around the most holy of Shiite sites. He said US forces had offered Marine patrols of the area to the interim Governing Council in Baghdad and religious leaders in Najaf. An answer was expected in the next day or two, he said.

As the mass of mourners left Baghdad, they carried angry banners denouncing both Saddam and the US president. "Saddam and Bush will not humiliate us," read another banner.

The procession began at the al-Kadumiya Shrine, one of Baghdad's most sacred Shiite sites, and was expected to grow as it wove its way southward. The marchers were to stop at holy sites in Karbala

before arriving at the blast site, Najaf's Imam Ali Shrine, for the funeral on Tuesday.

Police detained two Iraqis and two Saudis shortly after the Friday attack, and they provided information leading to the arrest of 15 other suspects, said a senior police official in Najaf, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Two Kuwaitis and six Palestinians with Jordanian passports were among the suspects, the official said. The remainder were Iraqis and Saudis, the official said, without giving a breakdown.

Initial information shows the foreigners entered Iraq from neighboring Kuwait, Syria and Jordan, the official said, adding that they belong to the Wahhabi sect of Sunni Islam. "They are all connected to al-Qaeda," the official said.

Fox said American forces have had no access to those in Iraqi police custody, but said he had heard numbers ranging from nine to 19.

Police said there were similarities between the mosque bombing and two recent attacks. The bomb at the Imam Ali Shrine was made from the same type of materials used in the Aug. 19 truck bombing at the UN headquarters in Baghdad and the Jordanian Embassy vehicle bombing Aug. 7, which killed 19, the Iraqi official said.

US officials have not confirmed any details of the arrests, which would substantiate Bush administration claims that bin Laden's followers have taken their war against the United States to Iraq.

American authorities have not taken an active public role in the mosque investigation because of Iraqi sensitivity to any US presence at the Najaf shrine.

The bombing in Najaf added ur-

ouster, said Saturday that his return to the council depended on the U.S.-led coalition's handing security matters to Iraqis, so that Muslim shrines could be under Islamic protection.

The men arrested claimed the recent bombings were designed to keep Iraq in a state of chaos so that police and American forces would be unable to focus on the country's porous borders, the Iraqi official said.

The Najaf police official, who led the initial investigation and interrogation of the captives, said the prisoners described plots to assassinate political and religious leaders and to damage power plants, water supplies and oil pipelines.

In the latest sabotage, an explosion and fire on Saturday struck the pipeline carrying oil from Iraq's northern Kirkuk fields to Turkey. The blaze further delayed resumption of the vital link, which costs Iraq an estimated US\$7 million each day it is out of operation. The blast was the fourth to hit the line since it briefly reopened earlier this month.

An American soldier drowned in Iraq and two others suffered slight injuries when the vehicle they were travelling in fell into a canal, the army said here Sunday. Bodyguards of firebrand Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr opened fire Sunday on a car at a checkpoint in the holy city of Najaf, killing two people and seriously wounding two others, according to hospital sources and relatives of the dead.

A mother and father were taking their daughter and her husband to a medical clinic near Sadr's home when they hit a checkpoint manned by Sadr's men who opened fire when the car sped forward, the sources said. —AP/APP

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US troops kill six Iraqis

Over 300,000 join Baqir's funeral

US soldier drowns; two killed, two hurt by Shiite cleric's bodyguards in Najaf

BAGHDAD: Beating their chests and calling for revenge, more than 300,000 Muslims began a two-day 175-kilometer march to the holy city of Najaf on Sunday to mourn a cherished Shiite leader who was assassinated in a car bombing.

The US military reported that 125 people died in Friday's attack in a dramatic increase from earlier hospital reports of 85. Najaf Governor Haider Mehadi requested on Sunday that the FBI help Iraqi police investigate the truck bombing, a Coalition Provisional Authority official said on condition of anonymity. FBI officials were due to travel to Najaf shortly to meet with authorities there, he said.

FBI agents are leading the investigations into both the Aug. 7 bombing of the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad and attack on

the UN headquarters 12 days later.

The faithful followed a flagbed truck carrying a symbolic coffin for Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, a moderate cleric and Saddam Hussein opponent. Authorities said they could only find al-Hakim's hand, watch, wedding band and a pen in the wreckage.

"Our revenge will be severe on the killers," read one of the many banners carried by mourners. Red and white roses were laid on the coffin and a large portrait of al-Hakim was placed in front of it. The Iraqi police handling the investigation into the bombing say they have arrested 19 men — many of them foreigners and all with admitted links to al-Qaida — in connection

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