

Iraqi Forces Storm a Church With Hostages in a Day of Bloodshed

By **John Leland**

Oct. 31, 2010

BAGHDAD — Iraqi antiterrorist forces stormed a church where gunmen had taken close to 100 hostages on Sunday in an afternoon of chaos that became a bloodbath. At least 30 hostages and 7 security officers were killed, and 41 hostages and 15 security force members were wounded, according to a source at the Ministry of the Interior.

The source spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters.

Abdul-Kader Jassem al-Obeidi, the minister of defense, said that most of the hostages were killed or wounded when the kidnappers set off at least two suicide vests as they took over the church. He defended the decision to storm the building, saying, “This was a successful operation with a minimum of casualties, and killing all the terrorists.” He added that an unspecified number of suspects were also arrested.

The source at the Ministry of the Interior said that the police had arrested eight gunmen believed to be affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq, a militant organization connected to Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia.

Hussain Nahidh, a police officer who saw the interior of the church, said: “It’s a horrible scene. More than 50 people were killed. The suicide vests were filled with ball bearings to kill as many people as possible. You can see human flesh everywhere. Flesh was stuck to the top roof of the hall. Many people went to the hospitals without legs and hands.”

The violence began shortly after 5 p.m. on Sunday. The gunmen first attacked the Baghdad stock exchange in the Karada neighborhood, killing two security guards and wounding four others, setting off two bombs and then taking refuge in the nearby Sayidat al-Nejat church.

The church — one of six bombed in August 2004 — was filled for Sunday services. A local television channel, Baghdadiya, reported receiving a telephone call from someone claiming to be one of the attackers and demanding the release of all members of Al Qaeda imprisoned in Arab countries.

Karada is an area dotted with federal police checkpoints, local police patrols and political parties with security details, as well as security guards attached to the stock market and the church. Mr. Obeidi, the defense minister, said, "It seems like there was negligence by the security forces, which we will investigate later."

The attack came two days after a suicide attack at a cafe in Diyala Province killed 21 people, the worst assault in more than a month, and as members of Iraq's four political blocs planned to meet in the heavily fortified Green Zone to try to break the impasse that has left Iraq without a new government nearly eight months after the national election.

Major acts of violence have not proliferated during the political deadlock, as many have feared, but smaller, focused attacks have been commonplace, stirring fears of a return to high levels of bloodshed.

The Iraqi antiterrorist unit, known as the Golden Force, which has been criticized for not being able to stop attacks, moved quickly to end the siege. Its forces swarmed the church by helicopter and sent in grenades and smoke grenades, but were rebuffed by the terrorists.

Security officers then stormed the church from the ground, breaking through the gates. Spokesmen from the police and the Ministry of the Interior would not give details of the final assault on the church, or say how many kidnappers were involved.

It was unclear whether the attackers' main target was the stock market or the church, or whether they planned to attack both.

The church, with a huge cross visible from hundreds of yards away, was already surrounded with concrete bollards and razor wire, and church leaders have been fearful of attack since the Rev. Terry Jones in Gainesville, Fla., threatened to burn a Koran on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Mr. Jones decided not to burn the Koran.

Iraqi employees of The New York Times contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Iraqi Forces Storm a Church With Hostages in a Day of Bloodshed