



French FM to bolster 'strategic partnership' with India visit

PORTUGAL'S DEMOCRACY FOUNDER MARIO SOARES DIES AGED 92

SUICIDE ATTACKS KILL 20 IN EASTERN BAGHDAD

SERIES OF ATTACKS KILL MORE THAN 80 IN A WEEK

BAGHDAD: Suicide bombs at two market-places in Baghdad, one of them claimed by Islamic State, killed at least 20 people yesterday, police and medics said, the latest in a spate of militant attacks in the Iraqi capital that have left dozens dead. In the first blast, the attacker drove an explosives-rigged car into a large vegetable market in the mainly Shi'ite district of Jamila, and detonated it after security forces opened fire to try to stop the vehicle, police sources said.

A suicide bomber wearing an explosive vest blew himself up a few hours later at a market in the mostly Shi'ite Baladiyat district. The first blast killed 13, and the second blast killed seven people. More than 50 were wounded. Islamic State claimed carrying out the first attack in an online statement, saying the bomber had targeted "a gathering of Shi'ites" in Jamila. A series of attacks in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities have killed more than 80 people in just over a week.

Several have been claimed by the Sunni extremist Islamic State, which is coming under increasing pressure from a US-backed offensive in Mosul, its last major stronghold in Iraq. Iraqi forces advanced to within several hundred meters of the Tigris river than runs through Mosul on Saturday, as their operation against the militants gathers pace. Islamic State is likely to resort to bomb attacks and similar tactics elsewhere in Iraq as it is driven out of its Mosul stronghold.

Iraqi forces have pushed IS out of much of the territory it once held, but this bombing and the many others that have preceded it highlight the danger the jihadists can pose to civilians even as they lose ground. "A soldier at the gate of Jamila market opened fire on a suicide car bomb after noticing a suspect vehicle but the terrorist blew up his car," interior ministry spokesman Saad Maan said.

Operation recapture

A police colonel and a hospital official said at least 12 people were killed and 39 wounded. Maan said the soldier who opened fire on the attacker was among the wounded. Jamila is the main wholesale vegetable market in Baghdad and lies in Sadr City, a vast,

mostly Shiite neighborhood in the northeast of the capital which has been repeatedly targeted. IS issued an online statement claiming the attack, using a nom de guerre indicating the bomber was Iraqi and saying that he targeted members of Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, whom the jihadists consider heretics.

IS claimed an attack on January 2 — also in Sadr City—when a suicide bomber blew up a vehicle packed with explosives among a crowd of day laborers waiting for work, killing 35 people. The jihadists overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in a swift 2014 offensive that swept through security forces unprepared for the assault. The number of bombings in the capital declined following the June 2014 offensive, apparently because the jihadists were occupied with holding territory they seized and later defending against Iraqi attacks.

Federal forces and units from Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region have since pushed IS back in a series of battles over a period of more than two years. On October 17, Iraqi forces launched a massive operation to recapture Mosul, now the country's last city in which IS holds significant ground. Iraqi forces punched into the city from the east, retook a series of neighborhoods, and are now approaching the Tigris River, which divides the city into its eastern and western sides. The western side, which is the smaller but more densely populated of the two, remains entirely under IS control.

Iraqi forces have also launched an operation to recapture IS-held towns near the Syrian border in Anbar province that along with Mosul and the northern town of Tal Afar are among the last populated areas under jihadist control. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said in late December that three months were needed to eliminate IS in the country. But even if the jihadists no longer openly hold territory, they can still strike at Iraqi civilians and security forces using bombings and hit-and-run attacks. —Agencies



IRAQ: Citizens inspect the scene after a car bomb explosion at a crowded outdoor market in the Iraqi capital's eastern district of Sadr City, Iraq, yesterday. —AP

OBAMA ADMITS UNDERESTIMATING IMPACT OF RUSSIAN HACKING

WASHINGTON: President Barack Obama yesterday admitted that he "underestimated" the impact misinformation and hacking can have on democracies, a remark that follows an intelligence report on Russian meddling in the US presidential election. In an interview on ABC's "This Week," Obama also warned his Republican successor Donald Trump, who takes office in less than two weeks, about the difference between governing and campaigning, saying the president-elect won't be able to run his presidency "the way you would manage a family business."

The interview, which was taped Friday, took place the same day that US intelligence agencies released an unprecedented report saying Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a campaign of hacking, leaking, and media manipulation

aimed at undermining the presidential campaign of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and boosting Trump. Although Obama said he was not taken in by Russian hostility to the United States, "I think that I underestimated the degree to which, in this new information age, it is possible for misinformation for cyber hacking and so forth to have an impact on our open societies, our open systems, to insinuate themselves into our democratic practices in ways that I think are accelerating."

Obama ordered the intelligence report, released to the public Friday, partly "to make sure that we understand this is something that Putin has been doing for quite some time in Europe, initially in the former satellite states where there are a lot of Russian speakers, but increasingly in Western democracies." "We have to pay attention," he said of upcoming elections in European ally nations, warning of possible interference. Russia initially aimed its unprecedented cyber campaign at damaging a potential Clinton presidency, and then turned to supporting Trump after a victory by the real estate billionaire appeared possible, the report from the Director of National Intelligence said.

Trump, who met the country's leading intelligence agency chiefs to hear the full report, has accepted the possibility of Moscow's involvement in hacking

US targets, including the Democratic National Committee, but rejected the conclusion that Russia interfered in the election. He has also ridiculed US intelligence agencies over their findings and promised he would establish closer ties to Moscow. Obama urged him "to develop a strong relationship with the intelligence community."

"If we're not vigilant foreign countries can have an impact on the political debate in the United States in ways that might not have been true 10, 20, 30 years ago in part because of the way news is transmitted and in part because so many people are skeptical of mainstream news organizations," he said. "In that kind of environment, where there's so much skepticism about information that's coming in, we're going to have to spend a lot more time thinking about how do we protect our democratic process." Obama also emphasized focusing "a lot more" on cyber security.

'Cordial' talks with Trump

Obama described his talks with the incoming president as "cordial." "He has been open to suggestions," he added, describing Trump as "very engaging and gregarious." "I've enjoyed the conversations that we've had. He is somebody who I think is not lacking in confidence," which is "probably a prerequisite for the job."

However, Obama believes Trump "has not spent a lot of time sweating the details" of policies, something he said could be "both a strength and a weakness." "If it gives him fresh eyes, then that can be valuable. But it also requires you knowing what you don't know and putting in place people who do have the kinds of experience and background and knowledge that can inform good decision making," he said.

Obama also weighed in on Trump's constant use of Twitter. "Clearly this worked for him, and it gives him a direct connection to a lot of the people that voted for him," he said. But when Trump becomes president, he cautioned, "there are world capitals and financial markets and people all around the world who take really seriously what he says, and in a way that's just not true before you're actually sworn in as president." —AFP

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