

Millions Mourn Martyred Imam Hussein on Holy Day Arbaeen

The Agencies

Millions of Muslims thronged shrines in the Iraqi holy city of Karbala Friday, defying a spate of attacks aimed at marring the ceremony. The start of the two day event of Arbaeen marks the 40th day after the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (p. b. u. h.) in Karbala in the year 680.



Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala, March 7, 2007. (AP Photo/Alaa al-Mariani)

According to Karbala's Governor Aqil al-Khazali, three million visitors had arrived in the city, braving suicide bombers, snipers and mortar barrages from those who are trying to undermine the event. "You can barely see the paving of the streets, which are filled with visitors," he declared, predicting that visitor numbers could hit six million. Khazali said no security violation has taken place so far inside the holy city, noting that security services are on alert. Arriving on foot bearing banners and copies of the Holy Qur'an, the visitors had faced great danger.



On Tuesday, 150 pilgrims were martyred by suicide bombers in the town on Hilla. Among huge crowds flying traditional black, green and yellow banners, many wrapped themselves in the Iraqi national flag and called for unity. The massive congregation came on the eve of a major regional peace conference in Baghdad.

"With this crime, they tried to divide Iraq and plant sedition and division," declared Hussein Khadim, who led a procession of devotees from the town of Diwaniyah, almost 100 kilometers (60 miles) away. "We would not hesitate to walk to the shrine even if blood was shed like rivers. We defy terrorists and their crimes on pilgrims." Clerics disagree on whether Friday or Saturday should be the official anniversary, and Karbala's events were due to cover both days.

Iran's *Press TV* reported on Saturday, that Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, speaking at the largest Friday prayers in Tehran, said, "While thousands of pilgrims go barefoot to Karbala, a bomb suddenly explodes killing and dismembering hundreds of people. The United States is jointly responsible for the blood that is spilled.

"Washington's policies have unsuccessfully played out in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Lebanon," he said.

“The justification the U.S. has been giving for its illegal invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq have reflected badly on the American public and the entire world,” he continued.

Meanwhile, Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr renewed his demand that US forces should leave Iraq. In a message distributed by his office in the holy city of Najaf to mark Friday’s Arbaeen mourning ceremony, Sadr told Iraqis: “Raise your voices shouting ‘No, no to America. No, no to Israel.’”

“Use this great occasion to demand the occupiers

leave our dear Iraq so that we could live in independence and stability,” said the statement. Sadr’s statement also condemned attacks over the past three days on Shiite pilgrims heading to the holy city of Karbala to mark Arbaeen, which have killed more than 150 people in a series of bombings and shootings.

“May God bless the souls of the martyrs and may those responsible for these despicable crimes burn in hellfire,” he said. Nevertheless, the Shiite leader called for unity among Iraqi Muslims, telling Iraqis: “I beg God to unite you and distance you from the specter of sedition and sectarian war,” *Press TV* reported on Saturday. Mourners stampeded in Karbala March 10 killing two persons and injuring 14.

Large numbers of mourners also reportedly turned out in Karachi, Pakistan where gunmen on a motorcycle

shot and killed a member of the Shia clergy in the Northwest part of the country. Arbaeen was also observed with vigor in Tehran.

Meanwhile a US sponsored peace conference took-place in Baghdad. The Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appealed Saturday for international help to cut off networks aiding extremists and warned envoys from neighbors and world powers that Iraq’s growing sectarian bloodshed could spill across the Middle East. Urging regional rivals on Saturday to stop using Iraq as a battlefield to fight out their proxy wars, the *Reuters* news service reported.



Arbaeen in Karbala, Iraq

About the talk the *AP* reported that U.S. envoy David Satterfield pointed to his briefcase which he said contained documents proving Iran was arming Shiite Muslim militias in Iraq. “Your accusations are merely a cover for your failures in Iraq,” Iran’s chief envoy Abbas Araghchi shot back, according to an official familiar to the discussions who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information. At a news conference after the meeting, Araghchi restated Tehran’s demands for a clear timetable for the withdrawal of U.S.-led forces, which he insisted had made Iraq a magnet for extremists from across the Muslim world. “For the sake of peace and stability in Iraq...we need a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces,” said Araghchi, Iran’s deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs.
