

Cheney again links Iraq invasion to 9/11 attacks as bombing victims are buried

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By Hannah Allam and Laith Hammoudi, McClatchy Newspapers *Tue Mar 18, 5:20 PM ET*

BAGHDAD — Amid tears and wails, mourners in the southern city of Najaf on Tuesday began burying victims from a suicide bombing that killed nearly 50 worshipers and injured dozens of others just before evening prayers Monday in nearby Karbala .

In Baghdad , a long-anticipated Iraqi national reconciliation conference began with great fanfare, then quickly dissolved into the usual sectarian and political stalemates that have marred several similar gatherings in recent years.

But Vice President Dick Cheney gave an upbeat view of conditions in Iraq as he concluded his unannounced trip to mark the fifth anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion. Cheney also defended the toppling of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein as part of the struggle against terrorism following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

This month, an exhaustive Pentagon-sponsored review of more than 600,000 Iraqi documents captured during the 2003 U.S. invasion found no evidence that Saddam's regime had any operational links with the al Qaida terrorist network.

But Cheney, who spent the night at a sprawling U.S. base in the northern town of Balad, told soldiers they were defending future generations of Americans from a global terror threat.

"This long-term struggle became urgent on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001 . That day we clearly saw that dangers can gather far from our own shores and find us right there at home," said Cheney, who was accompanied by his wife, Lynne, and their daughter, Elizabeth.

"So the United States made a decision: to hunt down the evil of terrorism and kill it where it grows, to hold the supporters of terror to account and to confront regimes that harbor terrorists and threaten the peace," Cheney said. "Understanding all the dangers of this new era, we have no intention of abandoning our friends or allowing this country of 170,000 square miles to become a staging area for further attacks against Americans."

Cheney later traveled to Irbil , the capital of the mostly autonomous Kurdish region, for a meeting with Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani , before flying to Oman .

Meanwhile, at the graveyard in Najaf, police restricted funerals to eight family members, out of fears that the funerals would become a target for further attacks. Emotions ran high among mourners of the bombing victims. One man draped himself over a coffin and sobbed,

“My father, my father.”

“Security forces have been negligent in securing the city and the pilgrims,” said Mohamed Hassan Ali , who buried his cousin, a policeman who was killed in the blast. “This area should have had camera monitoring, searches and equipment to detect explosives.”

The devastating security breach at one of Iraq’s most sacred places added to the pressure on Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki to make recent security gains stick and to keep the country on track for October elections.

The Baghdad reconciliation conference was intended to bring the country’s warring factions to the negotiating table.

But only half of the 700 invited guests showed up, and any real chance for negotiations dissolved when both the leading Sunni Muslim bloc and the powerful faction loyal to the rebel Shiite Muslim cleric Muqtada al Sadr announced boycotts.

“We entered the conference to reaffirm our support for national reconciliation, and we left to show our rejection of all these fake conferences,” Nassar al Rubaiye , a Sadr-allied lawmaker, said of his group’s walkout. Most Sunnis and Sadrists didn’t participate, and Shiite lawmakers in attendance hinted that the groups weren’t missed.

Sunni lawmakers boycotted because they believe Maliki hasn’t made good on pledges to disband Shiite militias, release detainees not charged with crimes and include Sunni legislators in security decisions.

Members of Sadr’s militant Shiite movement said they walked out of the conference because of the lack of dialogue in preparations, a crackdown on Sadr’s forces in the south and to protest thousands of Iraqi detainees in U.S. custody.

Across the board, there were complaints of late invitations, snubs and general disarray. Even Wathab Shaker, head of the parliament’s national reconciliation committee, said he was left out of all planning for the conference. He is a Sunni.

“No contact had been made between the preparation committee for the conference and the parliament’s reconciliation committee. Absolutely no contact,” Shaker said. “I wish them good luck.”

Tuesday’s roster of attacks included two roadside bombs in Baghdad — one targeting civilians at a market in Shaab, the other at a busy intersection in al Bunook— that killed four Iraqis and wounded at least 13, authorities said. A car bomb outside an electronics store in Mosul killed three and wounded 40, the U.S. military said.

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emphasis added

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