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Shiite Militia Marches in Iraq to Back Cleric Critical of U.S

By REUTERS

BAGHDAD, Iraq, April 3 — Thousands of supporters of a virulently anti-American Shiite cleric, Moktada al-Sadr, marched through the streets of Baghdad on Saturday.

Many were members of Mr. Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army. They paraded through Sadr City, the sprawling Shiite slum in the northeast of the Iraqi capital that is Mr. Sadr's power base. It was the militia's first major show of strength in months.

Some of the marchers wore black masks, and many carried banners and pictures of the cleric and of his father, who was assassinated in 1999. They were not armed. An American and an Israeli flag were set on fire.

"We are here to show the world our might," said Sadiq al-Hashimi, a cleric leading a group of marchers he identified as members of the Mahdi Army. "This army can be a striking force at any moment, it's a time bomb that will go off at a time and place it chooses."

A senior military official in Baghdad has estimated the number of the Mahdi Army in the "high hundreds to thousands" and said its antioccupation stand "concerns us greatly."

The Mahdi Army has kept a relatively low profile since October, when members of the militia ambushed American soldiers in Sadr City. Two soldiers and two Iraqis were killed.

Last Sunday, the American-led authorities closed down a newspaper that is considered Mr. Sadr's mouthpiece, accusing it of inciting violence. His supporters have held several major protests since then.

Also in Baghdad, gunmen killed the police chief of Mahmudiya, a town just south of the capital, as he was leaving his home in Baghdad.

The Associated Press reported that shortly afterward, according to a police officer, Khaldoon al-Gurairi, six attackers shot at a four-man police patrol in Mahmudiya, killing one and wounding three. A 60-year-old bystander was also killed.

On Friday, the police chief in Kufa, further south, was shot dead along with a colleague.

Bomb Topples Mosque in Baquba

BAQUBA, Iraq, Sunday, April 4 (Reuters) — A bomb exploded outside a small Shiite mosque in the town of Baquba, north of Baghdad, early on Sunday, destroying most of the building and wounding one person, witnesses said.

A Reuters television cameraman at the scene said the Al Rasool Al Adham mosque had collapsed from the force of the explosion, which went off after morning prayers, when the building was mostly empty.