
ROCKETS HIT BAGHDAD'S GREEN ZONE AFTER PROTESTS TURN VIOLENT

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Two rockets landed in Baghdad's highly fortified Green Zone on Saturday night following clashes at anti-government protests that left five dead, according to Iraqi security and hospital officials.

The rocket attack left no casualties as the munitions landed on the parade grounds in the center of the highly fortified Baghdad compound that is home to Iraq's government and most foreign embassies. It was not immediately clear who fired the projectiles.

Saturday's protests were called for by influential cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and clashes that erupted as crowds pushed toward the Green Zone left two policeman and three protesters dead, according to police and hospital officials.

The officials said six other policemen were injured along with dozens of protesters. The violent outbreak prompted the government to call for a "full investigation."

The demonstrators loyal to al-Sadr gathered in Baghdad's downtown Tahrir square demanded an overhaul of the commission overseeing local elections scheduled this year. Al-Sadr has accused the commission of being riddled with corruption and has called for its overhaul.

Shots rang out in central Baghdad as security forces used live fire and tear gas to disperse the crowds. An Associated Press team at the scene witnessed ambulances rushing away protesters suffering from breathing difficulties.

Hospital officials who spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not allowed to brief journalists said the policemen died of gunshot wounds. They gave no details as to the cause of death of the protesters.

While at times the crowds advanced toward Baghdad's highly fortified Green Zone, by afternoon they began to disperse after a statement from al-Sadr's office called on his followers to refrain from trying to enter the compound.

Meanwhile, Iraq's prime minister ordered an investigation into the violence.

"The prime minister ordered a full investigation into the injuries among security forces and protesters during the demonstration today in Tahrir square," read a statement from Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's office Saturday evening.

Al-Sadr's office issued another statement Saturday night following news of protester casualties claiming that "excessive force" was used against the demonstrators and threatened greater protests. "The next time the blood of our martyrs will not go in vain," the statement read.

"We will not give in to threats," said the head of the electoral commission, Serbat Mustafa, in an interview with a local Iraqi television channel Saturday afternoon. Mustafa said he would not offer his resignation and accused al-Sadr of using the commission as a political "scapegoat."

Al-Sadr has been a vocal critic of al-Abadi, and last year protests that included many of his followers breached the highly fortified Green Zone twice.

Attention in Iraq is generally focused on the war against the Islamic State group, with Iraqi forces

currently fighting the militants in Mosul, but al-Abadi is also facing a serious power struggle in Baghdad. A deepening economic crisis and persistent insurgent attacks in the Iraqi capital have fueled support for powerful political opponents of al-Abadi like al-Sadr.

Al-Abadi has said that he respects the rights of all Iraqis to peacefully demonstrate but called on the protesters Saturday to obey the law and respect public and private property.

Kaynak/Source: