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Maliki Gives Shiite Militias 72 Hours to Halt Fighting

By [JAMES GLANZ](#) and [ANAHAD O'CONNOR](#)

BAGHDAD — A day after launching a huge operation that ignited heavy fighting in two of Iraq's largest cities, Prime Minister [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#) gave the Shiite militias controlling the southern oil city of Basra an ultimatum on Wednesday: lay down their weapons within 72 hours or face more severe consequences.

As the fighting in Basra and Baghdad intensified on Wednesday, the American military command, speaking for the first time about the crackdown, characterized it as an Iraqi-led operation in which American-led forces were playing only an advisory role. An Iraqi hospital official said that the battle in Basra between Iraqi forces and Shiite militias led by [Moktada al-Sadr](#), the anti-American cleric, had so far claimed the lives of 40 people and wounded at least 200, figures that include militia members as well as Iraqi officers.

The fighting threatens to destabilize a long-term truce that had helped reduce the level of violence in the five-year-old Iraq war. Mr. Maliki, who considered the operation so important that he traveled to the city to direct the fighting himself, issued his ultimatum on Iraqi state television.

"Those who were deceived into carrying weapons must deliver themselves and make a written pledge to promise they will not repeat such action within 72 hours," he said. "Otherwise, they will face the most severe penalties."

An American military spokesman, Maj. Gen. Kevin J. Bergner, repeatedly sought on Wednesday to distance Western forces from the operation, saying that Mr. Maliki and his security ministers planned and carried it out on their own. He said American-led forces were on standby.

Nearly 16,000 Iraqi police officers and 9,014 Iraqi Army troops were involved in the operation, which General Bergner said was not specifically aimed at Mr. Sadr's Mahdi Army.

"This is about criminal activity," he said. "This is about those who are not respecting the rule of law."

The Iraqi hospital official, who requested anonymity, did not specify how many of the people killed or wounded so far were militiamen, Iraqi soldiers or civilians caught up in the fighting. Three United States citizens working for the American government in Baghdad were seriously wounded Wednesday in a mortar attack on the Green Zone, the diplomatic and government compound, Reuters reported, citing an American Embassy spokeswoman.

The fierce battles, along with indications in recent weeks that militia and insurgent attacks had already been creeping up, raised fears across Iraq that Mr. Sadr could pull out of a cease-fire he declared last summer. If his Mahdi Army militia does step up attacks, that could in turn slow American troop withdrawals.

There were also serious clashes reported Tuesday in the southern cities of Kut and Hilla, and Major Bergner said Wednesday that fighting involving the Mahdi Army was continuing around the country.

In Basra on Tuesday, American and British jets roared through the skies, providing air support for the Iraqi military. A British Army spokesman for southern Iraq, Maj. Tom Holloway, said that while Western forces had not entered Basra, the operation already involved nearly 30,000 Iraqi troops and police forces, with more arriving. "They are clearing the city block by block," Major Holloway said.

The scale and intensity of the clashes in Baghdad kept many residents home. Schools and shops were closed in many neighborhoods and hundreds of checkpoints appeared; in some neighborhoods they were controlled by the government and in others by militia members.

Also on Tuesday, barrages of rockets and mortar shells pounded the fortified Green Zone area. An American military spokesman said there were two minor injuries to civilians in the Green Zone.

Even before the crackdown on militias began on Tuesday, Pentagon statistics on the frequency of militia and insurgent attacks suggested that after major security gains last fall, the conflict had drifted into something of a stalemate. Over all, violence has remained fairly steady over the past several months, but the streets have become tense and much more dangerous again after a period of calm.

It is not clear how responsible the restive Mahdi militia commanders are for stalling progress in the effort to reduce violence. In recent weeks, commanders have protested continuing American and Iraqi raids and detentions of militia members.

If the cease-fire unravels, there is little doubt about the mayhem that could be stirred up by Mr. Sadr, who forced the United States military to mount two bloody offensives against his fighters in 2004 as much of the country exploded in violence.

Sadiq al-Rikabi, the prime minister's political adviser, and other Iraqi officials said that just how the unrest in Baghdad was related to the crackdown in Basra was unknown.

On Tuesday, Sadr City, the Baghdad neighborhood that is the center of the Mahdi Army's power, was sealed off by a cordon of Iraqi troops and what appeared to be several American units.

A New York Times photographer who was able to get through the cordon found more layers of checkpoints, each one run by about two dozen heavily armed Mahdi Army fighters clad in tracksuits and T-shirts. Tires burned in the city center, gunfire echoed against shuttered stores, and teams of fighters in pickup trucks moved

about brandishing machine guns, sniper rifles and rocket-propelled-grenade launchers.

“We are doing this in reaction to the unprovoked military operations against the Mahdi Army,” said a Mahdi commander who identified himself as Abu Mortada. “The U.S., the Iraqi government and Sciri are against us,” he said, referring to a rival Shiite group whose name has changed several times, and is now known as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, which has an armed wing called the Badr Organization.

“They are trying to finish us,” the commander said. “They want power for the Iraqi government and Sciri.”

Basra, which until 2005 enjoyed relative peace, has since been riven by power struggles among the Mahdi Army and local Shiite rivals, like the Badr Organization and a militia controlled by the Fadhila political party, a group that split from the Sadr party.

In the weeks leading up to the operation, Iraqi officials indicated that part of the operation would be aimed at the Fadhila groups, which are widely believed to be in control of Basra’s lucrative port operations and other parts of the city. The ports have been plagued by corruption, draining revenue that could flow to the central and local governments. But the operation also threatens the Mahdi Army’s strongholds in Basra.

Prime Minister Maliki’s government depends on support from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq but is less dependent now on coalitions with the Mahdi Army.

In Basra on Tuesday, Iraq’s most important oil-exporting center, thousands of Iraqi government soldiers and police officers moved into the city around 5 a.m. and engaged in pitched battles with Shiite militia members who have taken over big areas of that city.

Although Sadr officials said the cease-fire was still in effect, on Monday Mr. Sadr called for a nationwide civil disobedience campaign in response to what his followers said was an unwarranted crackdown. Some Mahdi commanders referred to an edict by Mr. Sadr saying their militias had the right of self-defense.

A member of Mr. Sadr’s political party in Basra, Sheik Abdul Sattar al-Bahadli, complained bitterly about the enormous operation, claiming that it was aimed at innocent people in Basra.

“We never witnessed such attacks even under the regime of [Saddam Hussein](#),” Mr. Bahadli said Tuesday. “Maliki gave orders and said, ‘Erase them.’”

But Mr. Maliki said in a statement on Tuesday that the operation was intended to root out “outlaws” who, he said, were working with local confederates inside and outside the government.

“The federal government, pressed by its obligations to support the local government in Basra and support its officials, has decided to restore security and stability and impose the law,” the statement said

An American military official said Tuesday that coalition forces had supported Iraqi security forces in clashes around Sadr City with “special groups” — a term reserved for what American commanders say are Iranian-backed Shiite splinter groups, which include portions of the Mahdi Army.

“A coalition forces helicopter also engaged targets north of Sadr City in support of this operation,” the official said, asserting that despite the fighting, most of Baghdad had been peaceful and that there were still signs of progress on security in most areas of Iraq and its capital.

“We feel that the cease-fire is being honored” by those loyal to Mr. Sadr, the official said. The cease-fire, he said, “is in the best interest of all Iraqis.”

On Tuesday, witnesses in Basra said jets flew overhead as armored vehicles raced through the city and machine gun and cannon fire reverberated through the streets. Civilians took refuge in their homes. Iraqi television showed images of civilian gunmen with grenade launchers taking up positions and ambulances ferrying the wounded to hospitals.

On Tuesday night, after about six hours of silence, armored vehicles and helicopters could again be heard moving through the city, witnesses said. Gunfire and shelling could be heard to the north.

Reporting was contributed by Michael Kamber, Joao Silva, Anwar J. Ali and Hosham Hussein from Baghdad, and employees of The New York Times from Baghdad, Basra, Hilla, Diwaniya and Kut.

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