

Iraqi Town Left Devastated by Attack
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MUSAYYIB, Iraq - Emad Jabouri was buying fruit and ice for his five children when the explosion struck, severing his right leg.

"I'm finished now," said the 42-year-old operator of a kebab stand, from his hospital bed Sunday.

Ali Khalil, a builder, was heading home from a day's work when the fireball engulfed him, spreading third-degree burns over 30% of his body.

"I need oxygen," the 22-year-old cried, as he shivered in another bed.

Kadhem Aziz was sitting at home when the blast badly wounded his 15-year-old nephew, Qusay.

"He was merely crossing the street on his way home," said Aziz, who lost several relatives in the blast. "Musayyib is a small city. This was like a nuclear explosion."

The death toll surged past 90 on Sunday, a day after a man with a bomb strapped to his waist blew himself up next to a loaded fuel tanker, incinerating people and buildings in this mostly Shiite Muslim town.

Law enforcement officials in Baghdad and nearby Hillah, the capital of Babil province, say the massive explosion around the time of sunset prayers Saturday was part of an elaborate operation designed to inflict maximum civilian casualties.

Authorities expect the number of dead to increase because many of the 150 people wounded in Saturday's attack suffered life-threatening injuries.

The Musayyib bombing was the deadliest attack in Iraq since a Feb. 28 explosion in Hillah killed more than 130 people.

A police official in Baghdad said the license plate of the gasoline tanker involved in the blast matched one stolen by armed bandits a few days ago on the road between the capital and Fallouja.

Police in Hillah said the suicide bomber, who was on foot, set off his explosives as soon as the tanker's driver left the scene.

"These people harbor satanic ideas," said the spokesman for the provincial police headquarters, a captain who asked to be identified by his nickname, Abu Hareth, for security reasons. "It was just like hell itself."

At funerals and hospital recovery wards, victims of Saturday's bombing struggled with their grief. Many described being caught in an inferno that shot flames 40 feet into the sky, towering over the minaret of a downtown mosque. Many families died when the blast shattered their homes.

Like Jabouri, many of the victims were milling around the town square, shopping for clothes and groceries. Others were heading home after a hot day.

Musayyib, a city of about 10,000, lies outside the so-called Sunni Triangle, where the Sunni Arab-led insurgency is centered, and at the edge of a lush agricultural region south of Baghdad that in the last year has become rife with bombings, kidnappings and banditry.

Stark reminders of the region's violence lined the road from Baghdad to Musayyib and Hillah on Sunday.

The blackened remains of roadside bombs and the mangled carcasses of burnt-out fuel trucks, blown up by insurgents and shellacked brown by recent sandstorms, littered the road. A blown-up Chevrolet Caprice with its innards hanging out rested along the road embankment.

In Latifiya, an insurgent stronghold, police officers had vacated their onetime headquarters. Throughout the town, only one traffic cop was visible. A U.S. soldier could be seen detaining two suspects and searching their Volkswagen Jetta in Iskandariya, another violence-scarred village where Shiite pilgrims from Baghdad and other northern cities have recently been killed, apparently tortured to death.

In Yousifiya, a suicide car bombing Sunday killed one civilian.

No fewer than eight checkpoints - manned by various teams of Iraqi army, Iraqi police, Iraqi highway patrol and U.S. military personnel - dotted the 40-mile road from Baghdad to central Musayyib, which was closed to vehicular traffic.

Such measures offered little protection against pedestrian suicide bombers like the one who struck Musayyib.

The suicide bomber was apparently sitting at a cafe along a traffic circle in the town's main square. He sidled up to the truck as it stopped across the roundabout from the People of Musayyib Hosseiniyeh, a Shiite mosque. Several witnesses said they had spotted the driver escaping moments before the explosion.

"The explosive belt is very hard for us to counter," said Wathiq Jawad, a police detective in Hillah. "We cannot detect it."

Samir Ibrahim, a 30-year-old computer engineer, was surfing the Internet at a cafe in the square, a lively if modest commercial center of two- and three-story buildings filled with private doctors'

offices, outdoor clothing stalls, coffee and teahouses, pastry shops, ice vendors and cellphone retailers.

Ibrahim escaped the bombing unharmed but lost three cousins.

"The truck was full of gas, and fire was floating in the air and burned the buildings that were close," he said. "Most of the people who were there were shop owners and women who had come to shop or see a doctor."

The explosion burned a 300-foot black circle in the town center, damaging nearby buildings. As the fire erupted, mortar rounds landed near the police station and the hospital, adding to the chaos.

Ibrahim watched in horror as men, women and children burned to death in a blast that destroyed 20 cars and torched ramshackle houses.

"A little one was only 3 months old, and she did not make it," he said.

Abbas Taeb, a Hillah surgeon who was on call Saturday night, said that after treating a few bombing patients at his teaching hospital, he was dispatched to Musayyib Hospital, where the halls were already filled with cadavers wrapped up for burial.

He was later ordered to downtown Musayyib to provide emergency care. The mosque in the city's center was destroyed.

Firemen had put out the blaze. He saw bodies burned to the bone, and blood in the streets mingling with water from the fire engines.

Pharmacist Qassem Hamza was at work at Musayyib Hospital when the fireball erupted, killing his eldest brother and his 13-year-old nephew and badly wounding his older brother, Razzaq, a 25-year-old medical student.

"I'm in total shock," he said. "I cannot believe what has happened."

On Sunday afternoon, residents walked amid broken glass and shuttered shops. A speaker on a megaphone declared three days of mourning. One man appeared stunned as he declared that his brother and father were still missing.

Ali Khudair Mohammed, a 58-year-old high school teacher, tried in vain to wash away the horrific images of the blast.

"I saw how the flames swallowed the panicked people as they ran away," he said. "The fire chased the people down and ate them alive."

Patients with bone injuries and shrapnel wounds had been shuttled to the Hillah hospital's first floor and patients in need of surgery to the second floor. On the third floor were the patients with the worst injuries, third-degree burns over large parts of their bodies.

"They are all dying," Taeb said as he guided a reporter into the ward.

On one bed Montazar Dalil, 10, lay shivering and delirious with third-degree burns down to his arteries across his legs, arms and cherubic face. The morphine drip had fallen out of the boy's neck, and Taeb gently readjusted it, frowning in dismay.

"In Europe they have the greatest medical equipment and medicine in the world," he said quietly. "But even people there still die from burns like this."

Elsewhere Sunday, a suicide car bombing killed four civilians and two police commandos near a military base in Baghdad. Another car bomb killed a civilian and police officer in the Sadiya district. A car bomb apparently targeting an office of the electoral commission in the Camp Sara area killed three people.

Daragahi reported from Hillah and Fakhrildeen from Musayyib. Times staff writers Suhail Affan and Zainab Hussain in Baghdad contributed to this report.