

Iraq-Based Bulgarian Helicopter Shot Down, 11 Dead

April 21 (Bloomberg) -- A Bulgarian-owned commercial helicopter was shot down in Iraq today by rocket-propelled grenades, and 11 people on board were killed, the Bulgarian Transport Ministry said in a statement.

Six Americans, the three Bulgarian crew and two Filipino bodyguards died in the attack, which occurred at around 2 p.m., the Bulgarian Transport Ministry said. Earlier, the Bulgarian Defense Ministry said nine people had died.

The helicopter was a civilian version of the Russian Mi-8 and was owned by Heli Air Co., the ministry said. The helicopter was leased with its crew to the Canadian firm Sky Link that operates out of Baghdad airport, the Bulgarian Transport Ministry said in a statement.

The incident, the deadliest of its kind since 10 British and Australian servicemen died in a Hercules C-130 crash Jan. 30, occurred to the north of the Iraqi capital and is being investigated, a U.S. military spokesman, who declined to give his name, said by phone. He said he couldn't confirm the cause of the crash or that Americans had died. Calls to the U.S. embassy weren't answered.

Attacks on civilians in Iraq are increasing, a sign that the insurgency is expanding from assaults on U.S. and Iraqi security forces toward civil war, according to analysts, including Stephan Wolff, professor of Middle East politics at the U.K.'s University of Bath and a consultant to the British Foreign Office.

Supporters of ousted President Saddam Hussein's Sunni Muslim Baathist regime and followers of al-Qaeda-linked terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi have been trying to destabilize the country and cripple its economy since the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Hussein.

Stadium Deaths

Iraqi interim Defense Minister Hazem Shaalan today said that 19 people found shot to death in a stadium north of Baghdad were fishermen who appear to have been captured by militants, the Associated Press reported. Residents yesterday said the bodies were those of soldiers, AP said.

International broadcasters today aired photographs of the bodies of more than 50 Shiite civilians that Iraqi President Jalal Talabani said yesterday were found in the River Tigris and were killed by Sunni insurgents who seized them from the town of al-Madain, south of Baghdad, last week.

Iraqis marched through the streets of Najaf today carrying 17 corpses to the cemetery of people said to have been found along the river, AFP said. They carried placards that denounced "the terrorist sectarian liquidation carried out against Shiites in al-Madain," and called on the government to take action, AFP said.

By stepping up assaults on civilians, especially on Shiites, insurgents are sending a message to Iraq's new Shiite-dominated government, Wolff said in an interview yesterday. Sunni militants are showing they want a return to the Baathist regime that provided them with privileges, while al-Qaeda-linked terrorists are making the point that they'll never regard any Iraqi government as legitimate, he said, adding that they'd only back a Taliban-style regime.

Al-Jazeera television broadcast pictures of the downed helicopter that showed it as burnt-out hull. It was leased to Sky Link for the Jan. 30 vote and remained in Iraq for missions, the Transport Ministry said. Bulgaria, which joined the North

Atlantic Treaty Organization in April 2004, has 485 soldiers in Iraq serving under Polish command in Ad-Diwanaiyah.

Foreigners Shot

Three foreign security contractors died in a small arms attack on the road to Baghdad's International Airport yesterday, Agence France-Presse said today, citing their employer, Edinburgh Risk. The company identified the men in a statement as James Hunt, a U.S. citizen from Kentucky, Chris Ahmelman, an Australian national from Queensland, and Stefan Surette from Nova Scotia, Canada, AFP reported.

The group was traveling in a convoy when a gunman in a sports utility vehicle opened fire, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said in an e-mailed statement that didn't identify the victims and only confirmed the death of an Australian. The Islamic Army in Iraq, which has claimed responsibility for kidnapping several foreigners, said it carried out the killings, al-Jazeera reported.

Al-Zarqawi's group today said it tried to kill Ayad Allawi late yesterday, in the fifth attempt on the interim Prime Minister's life, AFP reported, citing a statement posted on the Internet.

The violence is occurring as political negotiations on Iraq's new government continue. Talabani said he isn't certain it will be unveiled today as he indicated it would be yesterday, al-Jazeera reported. Prime Minister-designate Ibrahim al-Jaafari has one month from his April 7 appointment to name his 31 cabinet members, according to the Transitional Authority Law.

Talks between al-Jaafari of the United Iraqi Alliance, Talabani's Kurdish Alliance, which came second in Iraq's Jan. 30 vote for a National Assembly, and the Iraqi List headed by Allawi continued today, according to statement posted on the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Web site.

The leaders are determined to create a unity government and to incorporate Sunnis, who largely boycotted the poll, into the new administration, the statement said.

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Last Updated: April 21, 2005 12:02 EDT

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