

Military gains seen eroding Iraq al Qaeda strength

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* Al Qaeda replacement leaders less experienced

* Baghdad leader's capture brought valuable intelligence

* Group may be in "state of confusion and disarray"

By Nick Carey and Muhanad Mohammed

BAGHDAD, April 22 (Reuters) - The deaths earlier this week of al Qaeda's top two leaders in Iraq extend a string of smaller battlefield successes that may be eroding the group's ability to operate and threaten Iraq's increasing security.

The gains reported by U.S. and Iraqi officials against the Sunni Islamists look significant, coming at a time of vulnerability created by a March 7 election that produced no clear winner and what is shaping up to be a protracted political vacuum.

"We have arrested dozens of top figures of al Qaeda and got information from them that is very important. The arrests will continue for weeks and these weeks will be black for al Qaeda," Baghdad security spokesman Maj. Gen. Qassim al-Moussawi said.

"We have information that most of the remaining leadership of al Qaeda has begun to flee Iraq. We have issued orders to close the border and check people leaving," he told Reuters.

The blows against al Qaeda came to light after the killing by Iraqi and U.S. forces on Sunday of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, al Qaeda's leader in Iraq, and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the purported head of a local affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq.

U.S. officials called the killings a potentially devastating blow and Moussawi said al Qaeda in Iraq was in a "state of confusion and disarray" -- a view shared by some experts.

"Members of al Qaeda understand from day one that one day they will die, and the network's structure is built on people who can be replaced," said Mustafa al-Ani, an analyst at the Dubai-based Gulf Research Centre.

"But killing leaders has an impact because their replacements may not be of the same quality. The quality of al Qaeda in Iraq is no doubt being eroded," he added.

On Thursday, Moussawi told reporters of the capture of a man called Manaf Abdul Rahim al-Rawi in Baghdad on March 11 at the start of an anti-al Qaeda operation codenamed "Lion's Leap" and which led up to the killings of Masri and Baghdadi.

That operation began just days after the inconclusive parliamentary elections and amid fears that political uncertainty over the formation of a government would result in a spike in sectarian violence.

Minority Sunnis backed the alliance that won the most seats, and will be angry if they are not in the next government.

Frustrations among Sunnis, who dominated Iraq under Saddam Hussein, over the rise of Shi'ite power following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion fuelled an insurgency and the sectarian war.

'SUCCESS BEGETS SUCCESS'

Rawi's capture helped Iraqi security forces track down other al Qaeda leaders, Moussawi said.

Rawi -- an Iraqi born in Moscow in 1975 and a member of al Qaeda since 2003 -- supervised some of the worst attacks Iraq has seen, including coordinated assaults by suicide bombers on government ministries and hotels over the past year, he said.

Over the past month, the U.S. military has sent out a flurry of news releases proclaiming almost daily that senior figures of al Qaeda in Iraq have been killed or detained.

That has included the killing on April 20 of Hazim Abdullah al-Khafaji, whom the U.S. military said led al Qaeda military operations in the still volatile north of the country.

"When it comes to fighting al Qaeda, success begets success," said Rohan Gunaratna, a professor at the International Centre for Political Violence and Research in Singapore.

"The information (that) security forces gather when they capture or kill leaders of al Qaeda in Iraq leads to other leaders. And the more leaders they kill, the more Iraqis will come forward with intelligence on the others out there."

Gunaratna said that the key now for the Iraqi security forces is to keep up the pressure on al Qaeda in Iraq after the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops by the end of 2011.

"This operation has broken the momentum of al Qaeda in Iraq," he said. "The terrorist threat will remain in Iraq for an extended period." (Editing by Michael Christie and Mark Heinrich)



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