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Across Iraq, Insurgents Show Reach in Attacks

By KAREEM FAHIM

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Students escaping over a wall on Saturday at the University of Anbar, where Iraq security forces clashed with armed militants.

Militants attacked a university in the western city of Ramadi early Saturday, forcing students and professors to flee gunfire and shelling, while in the capital, at least 48 people were killed by car bombs in an apparently coordinated series of explosions.

It was the third day of surging violence in Iraq. Since Thursday, Sunni militants have conducted a series of lightning attacks in major cities, leaving scores of people dead and the government forces scrambling to recover.

On Thursday, gunmen carrying the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a Sunni extremist group, swept into the central city of Samarra, briefly capturing police stations, city buildings and several neighborhoods before being driven out.

Militant gunmen and suicide bombers have also mounted an offensive in the northern city of Mosul over the last few days, killing civilians and police officers.

Government troops have been able to quickly regain control of most of the terrain seized by the militants. But the scope of the attacks appears to have taken officials by surprise, while also signaling that the insurgency is gaining strength and expanding its reach.

Over the last year and a half, violence in Iraq has surged to levels last seen during the worst years of its civil war during the American occupation — aggravated, in part, by the civil war in neighboring Syria.

In Iraq, militants have managed to maintain control of the western city of Falluja for six months, holding off government forces that were trained and equipped by the United States at a cost of billions of dollars.

The United States, which withdrew its troops at the end of 2011, has sent arms and ammunition to bolster the Iraqi forces, but some of those weapons have been captured by militants during clashes, Iraqi officials said.

In a sign of the Iraqi government's frustration at the standoff in Falluja, the army has abandoned previous pledges not to harm civilians and has resorted increasingly to indiscriminate shelling of the city, striking residential areas and the city's main hospital, according to witnesses and human-rights workers.

Elsewhere, Iraqis have been left to face the brutality of the militants. In Baghdad, at least eight car bombs exploded within an hour on Saturday evening, striking commercial districts in mostly Shiite neighborhoods.

And in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, officials at the morgue said that the death toll after three days of fighting between militants and the government's security forces was approaching nearly 200 people. Dozens of families have been displaced by the fighting as the militants have tightened their hold on at least three neighborhoods, witnesses said.

In Ramadi, a professor at Anbar University said that at 6:45 a.m. on Saturday, he heard explosions as the militants stormed the campus. “It was intense shelling from everywhere,” he said. The impact shattered windows in the science building, injuring one of his students. Outside, the professor said, he saw about 50 militants.

As he and other professors and students left, the militants chastised him for not waiting to make sure that female students had been evacuated, he said.

Officials said that the militants had taken hostages, but witnesses disputed that account. “They didn’t stop anyone,” said the professor, who requested anonymity to avoid antagonizing any of the fighters. “Their goal was to evacuate the university. I believe they want the buildings as a base.”

The professor and others in his group escaped the campus through a hole in the wall surrounding the university. Others fled in their cars or buses. People without transportation — including families who had been sheltering at the university after being displaced from earlier fighting in Falluja or Ramadi — were forced to wait out the siege.

By about 3 p.m., government forces had surrounded the university. A local commander of tribal forces loyal to the government said that the militants had withdrawn from most of the campus and were holed up in the science building. “The goal was not to hold the university,” said Rafa’a el-Fahdawi, the commander, citing the relatively small number of militant fighters, compared with other recent attacks. “It was to terrify people.”