

Rockets fired at U.S. embassy in Iraq after series of attacks



Iraqi counterterrorism forces stand guard outside the US embassy in Baghdad, Iraq [File: John Moore/AFP]

Baghdad, July 8 (RHC)-- American diplomats and troops in Iraq and Syria have been targeted in three rocket and drone attacks in the past 24 hours, US and Iraq officials said on Wednesday, including at least 14 rockets hitting an Iraqi airbase hosting US forces, wounding two American service members.

While there were no immediate claims of responsibility for the attacks -- part of a wave targeting US troops or areas where they are based in Iraq and Syria -- analysts believed they were part of a campaign by Iranian-backed armed groups.

U.S. forces, who have 2,500 soldiers deployed in Iraq as part of an international anti-ISIL (ISIS) group coalition, have been targeted almost 50 times this year in the country, but the last few days have seen an increase in the frequency of attacks.

Iraqi armed groups aligned with Iran promised to retaliate after the US raids on the Iraqi-Syrian border killed four of their members last month. Two people were slightly wounded in the rocket attack on the Ain al-Asad airbase in western Iraq, said coalition spokesman US Army Colonel Wayne Marotto. The rockets landed on the base and its perimeter. He said earlier that three people were wounded. Commenting after Thursday's development, Wayne said each attack "undermines the authority of Iraqi institutions" and sovereignty.

U.S. officials, speaking to Reuters news agency on condition of anonymity, said the two personnel injured were U.S. service members. One suffered a concussion and the other had minor cuts, one of the officials added.

Two rockets were fired at the US embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone early on Thursday, Iraqi security sources told Reuters. The embassy's anti-rocket system diverted one of the rockets, said one of the sources -- a security official whose office is in the Green Zone. The second rocket fell near the zone's perimeter, security officials said.

Sirens blared from the embassy compound inside the zone, which houses government buildings and foreign missions, the sources said.

In Syria, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said no damage was done by a drone attack on the Al Omar oilfield in an eastern area bordering Iraq where US forces came under rocket fire but escaped injury on June 28.

"Our front-line forces against [ISIL] and coalition forces in the area of the Omar oilfield dealt with drone attacks," the Kurdish-led SDF said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor with sources in Syria, said pro-Iran groups had probably launched the drones from a rural area outside the town of Al-Mayadeen southwest of the oilfield.

It was the second such attack in days, after the SDF reported "two unidentified rocket-propelled grenades landed on the western side of the al-Omar oilfield" late on Sunday, which caused no casualties.

Separately, the Pentagon said a drone had been brought down in eastern Syria and that no US service members had been injured and there had not been any damage.

Meanwhile, Iraqi army officials said the pace of recent attacks against bases hosting US forces with rockets and explosive-laden drones was unprecedented. Iraqi military sources said a rocket launcher fixed on the back of a truck was used in Wednesday's attack and was found on nearby farmland set on fire.

On Tuesday, a drone attacked Erbil airport in northern Iraq, targeting a US base on the airport grounds, Kurdish security sources said. Three rockets also landed on Ain al-Asad on Monday without causing casualties.

Asked about the renewed violence, US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters: “These attacks reflect and are representative of the threat that Iran-backed militias present fundamentally to Iraq’s sovereignty and to Iraq’s stability.”

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