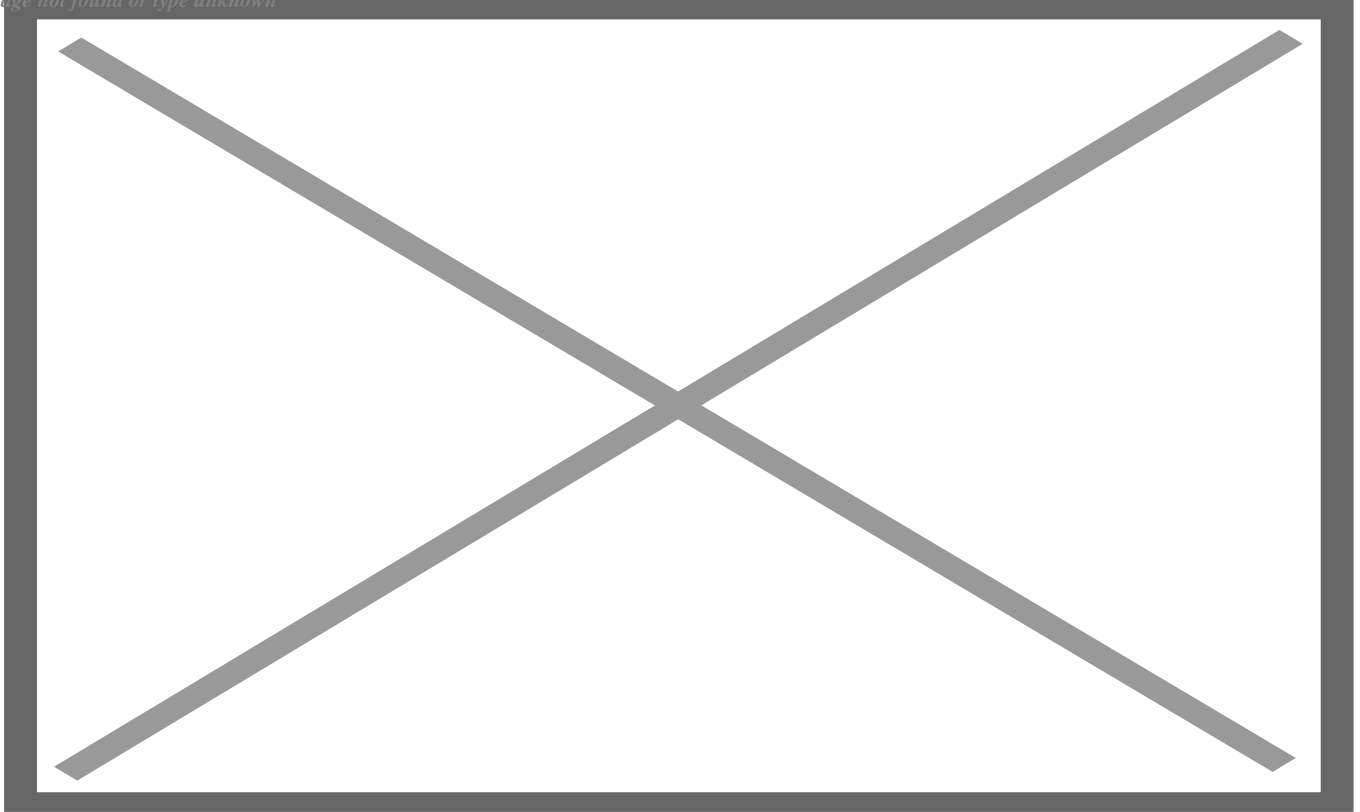


Death toll rises to 23 in Iraq riots

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Iraqi security forces fire teargas during protests by supporters of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr inside the government palace in Baghdad on Monday. Photograph: Hadi Mizban/AP

Bagdad, August 30 (RHC)-- Iraqi security forces cracked down on Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr's supporters with tear gas near Baghdad's Green Zone.

The death toll from police repression and clashes in the Iraqi capital rose to 23, the country's authorities said Tuesday after offering a new balance of events.

On Monday, after he announced his retirement from political activity in Iraq, hundreds of Moqtada Sadr's supporters occupied the Palace of the Republic, where the council of ministers is based.

Al Sadr's announcement caused many of his supporters to mobilize in several areas of Baghdad, sparking clashes with rival groups.

Earlier on Tuesday, he called on his supporters to withdraw from Baghdad's high-security Green Zone.

"I apologize to the Iraqi people, the only ones affected by the events," al-Sadr told reporters from his base in the central Iraqi city of Najaf on Tuesday.

In a televised speech, al-Sadr gave his supporters an hour to leave – and minutes later, some could be seen abandoning their positions on live television. Al-Sadr said that if his supporters did not withdraw in the hour, he would "distance" himself from them.

Shortly afterward, the army lifted a nationwide curfew imposed since violence erupted on Monday, raising hopes that there might be a halt to the deadliest violence in years.

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