

## **Iraqi officials say 23 soldiers, Sunni fighters killed**

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**Baghdad:** At least 23 Iraqi soldiers and government-allied militiamen were killed today in an attack by Islamic State militants in the turbulent Anbar province west of Baghdad, Iraqi military and police officials said, in the second heavy death toll suffered by the Iraqi military and its allies in recent days in the vast Sunni region. The officials said today's attack, which killed 17 soldiers and six Sunni militia fighters, took place in the rural district of Jaramshah, north of Anbar's provincial capital, Ramadi.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media. They said the IS fighters used suicide bombings and mortar shells and that chief of army operations in Anbar, Maj-Gen Qassim al-Dulaimi, was lightly wounded in the attack. News of today's attack came two days after up to 50 soldiers were killed by the IS in two ambushes elsewhere in Anbar province, much of which is under IS control, including Ramadi and the key city of Fallujah.

Government forces and allied Sunni and Shiite militiamen have been battling the Islamic State militants in Anbar for months, but, hampered by suicide bombings and booby trapped buildings, they have only made modest gains against the extremist group, which controls much of western and northern Iraq.

Also in Anbar, the officials said a joint attack by police and Sunni militiamen against IS positions in the Brownah area today was thwarted by the militants. Seven militiamen and three policemen were killed in the attack, they said.

In the oil refinery town of Beiji north of Baghdad, a spokesman for a government-backed Shiite militia said a series of suicide car bombings launched by the IS over recent days have killed at least 25 of his men.

The spokesman, Naziem al-Assadi from the Imam Ali Brigades, gave no further details, but other militia officials in the area spoke of at least 100 dead and injured in the attacks.

Government troops liberated Beiji from IS control late last year, but government forces and allied Shiite militiamen there have recently come under mounting pressure from IS militants advancing on the town.

A top military commander familiar with the situation there told The Associated Press today that IS militants now control about 50 per cent of both the town of Beiji and the refinery, a sprawling complex located a short distance to the north.

Elsewhere in Iraq today, a Russian-made military helicopter was forced to make an emergency landing after it was hit by ground fire in Salahdeen province north of Baghdad. The aircraft's crew members were not hurt, according to security officials.

The Islamic State said its fighters downed the helicopter near the city of Samarra in the same province. In scattered violence in Baghdad and its environs, six people were killed and 32 people were injured today by roadside bombs south and northeast of the city, according to security and hospital officials.

All officials and the top military commander spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

- AP