Bomber Kills 18 on Shiite Pilgrimage in Iraq

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON and RIYADH MUHAMMED

At least 18 people were killed and scores were wounded Thursday when a suicide bomber blew herself up in a tent filled with women on a religious pilgrimage, Iraqi security officials said. The attack, which came around dusk in the city of Iskandariya, occurred at the same apartment complex where a suicide bomber killed 40 Shiite pilgrims in February.

And at Camp Bucca, an American military base in southern Iraq, six sailors who were working as prison guards in Iraq are facing courts-martial on charges of abusing detainees, the United States Navy said in a statement on Thursday.

The victims of the suicide bombing, who included men as well as women, were resting in tents set up for pilgrims traveling on foot from Baghdad to the holy city of Karbala.

“I saw smoke, and I smelled the very bad smell of burned flesh and blood,” said Ali, an 18-year-old who lives at the apartment complex and gave only his first name.

“The reactions were a little less than at the last blast,” Ali added, referring to the February attack, “maybe because they already have been shocked.”

Local security officials had been concerned about attacks on pilgrims, particularly in the so-called triangle of death, a largely Sunni area south of Baghdad that has been the site of intense violence since 2003. Shiite pilgrims must march along a highway through Sunni towns in the area on the way to Karbala.

Twelve Iraqi Army and police battalions reached Karbala on Wednesday to protect the marchers, news services reported.

Earlier on Thursday, Iraqi security forces arrested 33 men in a town not far from Iskandariya who were suspected of planning attacks on pilgrims, Brig. Gen. Abdulameer Kamel Abdullah, a brigade commander, said in a telephone interview. The general said that 13 of the men were members of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, a homegrown Sunni insurgent group that American intelligence officials have said is foreign-led.

The number of attacks by women, who are often searched less thoroughly than are men at checkpoints, has risen in recent weeks. Last month, three female suicide bombers killed more than 30 people who were in Baghdad on a Shiite pilgrimage.

“We have warned previously that there are some female suicide bombers, but we lack female searchers,” said Maj. Gen. Fadhel Reddad al-Sultani, the commander of the police force in Babil Province, which includes...
Iskandariya. “We demanded more from the Ministry of the Interior, but they refused to give them to us.”

A Shiite pilgrim was killed and seven others were wounded by a roadside bomb in downtown Baghdad on Thursday. Another bomb in Baghdad, aimed at an Iraqi police patrol, killed one person and wounded five. In the northern city of Mosul, a policeman and a soldier were killed outside their homes.

The courts-martial against the sailors accused of abusing detainees are expected to begin within 30 days, the Navy’s statement said.

Seven other sailors received lighter punishments for failing to report the abuse, said Cmdr. Jane Campbell, a Navy spokeswoman. The punishments included being reduced in rank, being confined to the base and docked pay.

On Thursday morning, Iraq’s president, Jalal Talabani, left the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., after having successfully undergone heart surgery, according to a statement released by his office. The statement described Mr. Talabani as being in “good condition.”

An Iraqi employee of The New York Times from Babil province contributed reporting.