

IRAQ

## Sectarian violence on the rise as 50 die over two days

By PATRICK COCKBURN

50 people have died in the last two days in attacks across Iraq, as growing friction between Sunnis and Shias leads to more sectarian violence. Sunni anger has been increasing since Iraqi soldiers broke up a peaceful sit-in in a square in the town of Hawijah last month, killing dozens of people including at least eight children.

Car bombs exploded in Shia districts of Baghdad yesterday, targeting places where civilians are likely to gather. The first struck at a bus and taxi stop in the Shia working-class stronghold of Sadr City. Nine people were killed, including a child, and 16 were wounded. Car bombs detonated in two other Shia neighbourhoods, in

one case at a taxi stop and in another a market. A further five people were killed and 14 wounded.

Overall 17 people were killed yesterday and 33 the day before. The attacks bear the hallmark of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, a group showing greater strength due to mounting Sunni hatred of the Shia-dominated government.

Iraq's Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said sectarianism was behind the latest attacks. "We have to know that today's bloodshed is the result of sectarian hatred and also the stirring-up of these sectarian tensions," he said. But Sunni blame him for marginalising them, rejecting reforms and winning the election by frightening the Shia majority with the prospect of a Sunni counter-revolution.

BANGLADESH

## Tropical storm kills 12 as it makes landfall

By ANDREW BUNCOMBE and SYED TASHFIN CHOWDHURY in Dhaka

Tropical storm Mahasan hit the low-lying coast of Bangladesh yesterday, killing at least 12 people and causing more than one million to be evacuated. At least 30 further deaths have been reported as the storm has made its way through Sri Lanka and Burma.

Mahasana came ashore in

Bangladesh's Patuakhali district yesterday morning but lost power as it shed huge amounts of rain.

It avoided Bangladesh's second largest city, Chittagong, and the coastal resort of Cox's Bazaar.

Among those also spared its force were more than 100,000 refugees living in makeshift camps in the west of Burma. The region is no stranger to misery caused by cyclone; in 1991, a massive storm killed around 140,000 people.

NORWAY

## Wanted: polar bear scarer

Do you like wildlife and have strong vocal cords? If so, the governor of Svalbard might have a summer job for you: keeping polar bears away from researchers in the Arctic islands.

The successful candidate will have experience with the outdoors and, in the words of Helge Solli from the governor's office, a loud voice to scare the animals off. AP



IRAN

## Women banned from election

Women seeking to run in the presidential election on 14 June have been told they are not allowed to take part.

The remark by Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, one of Iran's constitutional watchdog group, effectively kills the largely symbolic bids by about 30 women seeking to run for office. AP

VENEZUELA

## Toilet paper stock wiped out

First milk, butter, coffee and cornmeal ran short. Now Venezuela is running out of the most basic of necessities - toilet paper.

President Nicolas Maduro has blamed anti-government forces for the shortage, and the embattled socialist government says it will import 50 million rolls to boost supplies. AP



Pablo Novak, the only resident of Epecuen, lived in the town in his youth when it was a thriving spa resort, top right. The flooding destroyed the entire town. ED STOCKER/AP



# THE TOWN THAT DROWNED

**The landscape has the permanent look of winter. Leafless trees jag skywards while a shimmering white dust covers the ground. The streets are deserted; the only sound is the breeze. Welcome to Epecuen, Argentina's ghost town, with a population of just one.**

Located 340 miles south-west of Buenos Aires, Epecuen was once a booming tourist destination on the shores of a salt lake famed for its healing properties. Then one day disaster struck. On 10 November 1985, after a period of heavy rain, the banks of the lake burst. The town, stretching back for more than 100 blocks, was submerged in water 10 metres deep.

Over the past few years the waters have receded and the town has re-emerged. Left behind is a crystalline residue that from a distance looks like snow, as well as hundreds of dead trees and a derelict resort. When the flood hit, residents were forced to pack their bags and leave. No one dared to return, except for 83-year-old Pablo Novak, who now has the dubious title of being contemporary Epecuen's only resident. Today he's out for a jaunt on his rusting bicycle with his two dogs in tow.

"I got used to life on my own," he says. "I decided to stay because I spent my youth here, I went to school here and also started a family here. So it seemed quite normal." The flood reduced Epecuen to rubble. No house was left untouched. Façades have disintegrated; walls have crumbled; pavements have sunk. Wooden staircases are exposed - in one spot are the rusting

**Epecuen in Argentina was submerged under 10 metres of water in 1985. Now the floods have gone - and one man has moved back in. Ed Stocker meets him**

remains of a 1930s Chevrolet that an owner failed to salvage.

The salt has preserved tiny details, freezing the resort in time and allowing a voyeuristic glimpse into the past. Near the main street are the remains of a pizzeria. The sculptures that the owner bought to decorate his business are still intact, including a stone crescent moon sitting outside as though it were still 1985. In the rubble a wood-fired pizza oven is clearly visible.

Walking among the crystalline ruins, the tracks left by a tractor that tried to salvage valuables from the long-gone Santa Teresista Church are still there. Dotted around the site, too, are green wine bottles half buried in the sand. Further away from the main drag is what used to function as the municipal camping area. The eerie site has an abandoned playground: the frame of a set of swings still stands, as does a rusting seesaw, every inch reminiscent of Chernobyl.

Javier Andres, head of tourism for the normally sleepy agricultural region of Adolfo Alsina, has been swamped with interest in the last few weeks due to a concerted effort to promote the ruins. Epecuen has been compared to Pompeii, he says, but there is one major difference.

"We don't think there's anywhere in the world quite like it," he explains. "Although it's been called the Argentinian Pompeii, there you're not able to walk around with a former resident explaining everything to you. Here you can do that."

The waters began their retreat in 2009 but the tourist board delayed launching a campaign until now, respectful of the reactions the floods continue to provoke among the hundreds who lost their livelihoods.

"When you visit Epecuen, the sensation is hard to explain," Mr Andres says. "There's a sense of wonder at this place that is completely in ruins, an apocalyptic vision. But then you can't help thinking about the people that lost everything here, years of effort and hard work that disappeared overnight. So there's a lot of sadness at the same time."

The devastated landscape has attracted the attention of several movie crews and Roland Joffé's Spanish Civil War drama, *There Be Dragons*, was partly filmed here. Yet the demise of Epecuen remains painful for former residents. The health resort was one of the most frequented in Argentina, growing in popularity from the 1920s and attracting European as well as local tourists at a time before the wide availability of alternative treatments.

The water - 10 times saltier than the sea - drew many of Buenos Aires's Jewish community, nostalgic for the



Dead Sea. The town's population of just over 1,000 would swell fivefold during the high season.

"There are some things you can repair, such as the economic damage," says Carlos Ruben Besagonill, 49, who used to run a hotel in Epecuen. "But you can't replace the experiences, the affection, the moments you passed there."

Mr Besagonill, who recently married and carries his one-year-old daughter in his arms, says that it's taken him more than 20 years to re-establish the business he had in Epecuen in nearby Carhue, now the region's main tourist

town. He was forced to leave everything in 1985. "I used to dream every night that Epecuen reappeared," he says. "I'd dream that I told my family: Look we can go back and paint the hotel, because I really thought it was possible."

Mr Besagonill is pleased that the ruins may soon be a major tourist attraction once more. For him, it should serve as a warning about "what not to do with nature". He says that the province may be to blame for poor water management, but that the town should never have been built so close to the shores of a lake that was liable to overflow.

Back on the main street, the ghosts of Epecuen continue to swirl around the crumbling concrete as Mr Novak recalls the ice-cream parlour he used to pass, the bar he'd visit for a beer and the clubs where he'd dance until the early hours.

Mr Novak says that his children don't like coming back - unlike his 21 grandchildren who love hearing his yarns and devour his photos of the old days - and every year they try to convince him to move away. But while he remains independent, he argues, he's going nowhere.

Although Mr Andres rejects the idea that somebody may be prepared to stump up the "six-figure sum" needed to rebuild Epecuen, Mr Novak remains dogged in his hope that the town will one day recapture its glorious past. "I always thought it would revive, that's the thing I find most difficult," he says wistfully. "I keep on hoping it will happen. But sadly no one seems to want to do anything."

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