

Iraqi army begins fresh crackdown on Shia fighters

Iraqi troops in the early hours of Thursday mounted a new security offensive against Shia militias in the southern province of Maysan after a four-day deadline for militants to surrender their arms expired.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had given militias in the provincial capital Amarah four days to lay down their arms. The deadline expired at midnight Wednesday.

Amara, 390 km south of Baghdad, is in a rural marshland on the Iranian border where Iraqi officials say weapons smuggling from Iran and the militias' uncontrollable activity create lawlessness.

'Troops in the province have encountered no trouble,' General Abdel-Karim Khalaf, spokesman for the Iraq's interior ministry, said.

He ruled out a possible curfew in Maysan similar to that imposed on other southern provinces, such as Basra, and the Shia enclave of Sadr City in eastern Baghdad, when similar offensives were launched in March.

The government wants to crack down on what al-Maliki calls 'criminal elements', many of whom are linked to radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The government has called in troops from cities nearby for deployment in Maysan.

Hundreds were killed in fierce fighting that erupted after the launch of a crackdown in Basra. Fighting stopped after a ceasefire was announced by al-Sadr May 10.

Scores of fighters in Maysan have already handed over their arms, explosives have been detonated and weapons caches uncovered in the past four days, according to the police.

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