

Mourners flood Karbala on Chehlum of Imam Hussain

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Shiite pilgrims from across Iraq and around the world thronged the shrine city of Karbala on Thursday for the climax of annual mourning rituals amid tight security over fears of militant attacks.

Massive crowds of people flooded the streets of the city, which officials said saw millions of visitors in the run-up to and conclusion of the Arbaeen commemorations, as sad songs blared from loudspeakers.

Black flags fluttered alongside pictures of Imam Hussein and his half-brother Imam Abbas, revered figures in Shiite Islam who are buried in Karbala, which lies 110 kilometres (70 miles) south of Baghdad.

Provincial governor Amal al-Din al-Har said some 18 million worshippers passed through the city by the end of the commemorations Thursday afternoon, many of them walking for days from across Iraq despite threats of violence by Sunni insurgents.

Among the worshippers were around 750,000 pilgrims from 30 different countries, leaving all of the city's 700 hotels packed to the brim, the governor said. Despite the spectre of attacks, no security incidents were reported on Thursday.

Arbaeen marks 40 days after the Ashura anniversary commemorating the slaying of Imam Hussein by the armies of the caliph Yazid in 680 AD.

"We are defying terrorism, and we are following the example of Karbala in sacrifice and redemption," said 40-year-old Mohammed Swadi, who noted that he had walked for 12 days from the southern port city of Basra for the occasion.

"This is not much when it comes to expressing our love for Imam Hussein."

Another pilgrim said she had walked for three days from the central city of Hilla in order to attend Arbaeen in Karbala, to pray for a cure for a skin disease.

"I have a skin disease that doctors could not treat, and I vowed to attend the pilgrimage walking on foot, and ask Allah with the name of Hussein to cure me," said the 35-year-old woman who gave her name as Umm Ali, or mother of Ali.

The threat of insurgent attacks has spurred authorities to deploy 35,000 soldiers and policemen to Karbala, including 2,500 policewomen at checkpoints across the city, with aerial surveillance also watching over pilgrims.

Attacks on Shiites in the past week alone have left at least 12 people dead, two of whom were

killed in an explosion while walking along the route from Baghdad to Karbala on Wednesday. The seventh century battle near Karbala is at the heart of the historical division between Islam's Sunni and Shiite sects, a split that fuelled sectarian violence between Iraq's majority Shiite and smaller Sunni population since the 2003 US-led invasion. Shiites make up around 15 percent of Muslims worldwide. They represent the majority populations in Iraq, Iran and Bahrain and form significant communities in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia. Now-executed dictator Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime barred the vast majority of .Ashura and Arbaeen commemorations