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By SAMEER N. YACOUB, Associated Press Writer

Tue Aug 2, 10:22 AM ET

BAGHDAD, Iraq - The U.S. military said Tuesday that six Marines were killed in action in western Iraq, pushing the death toll for Americans since the start of the war past 1,800.

The Marines, assigned to Regimental Combat Team-2 of the 2nd Marine Division, died Monday in Haditha, 140 miles northwest of Baghdad.

A seventh Marine was killed Monday by a car bomb in Hit, 50 miles southeast of Haditha in the volatile Euphrates River valley.

Insurgents posted handbills in Haditha, claiming to have killed 10 U.S. troops, seizing some of their weapons.

At least 1,801 members of the U.S. military have died since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count. At least 1,382 died as a result of hostile action. The figures include five military civilians.

In other violence, a roadside bomb targeting a U.S. military convoy exploded Tuesday at the entrance to a tunnel in central Baghdad, and at least 29 civilians were wounded, officials said.

The blast hit as the convoy was about to enter the tunnel in Bab Shargi, near Tahrir Square, said police Capt. Abdul-Hussein Munsif. Two Humvees appeared to have been damaged, he said.

U.S. and Iraqi forces placed a security cordon around the area. The U.S. military had no immediate information on casualties.

An emergency services official said on customary condition of anonymity that 29 wounded civilians were taken to two hospitals.

The bomb left a 3-foot-wide crater in the ground. Charred parts from the armored Humvee littered the site and seven civilian cars were also badly damaged.

U.S. troops took away some items from the damaged armored vehicle, including a helmet and two flak jackets.

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In Samarra, 60 miles north of the capital, an explosion about 5 a.m. Tuesday damaged a pipeline used for shipping fuel from the Beiji refinery to a power station in the Baghdad area, police said. Insurgents have frequently targeted the line to interrupt electricity in the Baghdad area — already critically low as demand rises in the summer.

The U.S. military said a reporter for the Army Times newspaper embedded with American troops was injured in a suicide car bombing Monday evening in western Iraq near the Syrian border.

U.S. military spokesman Capt. Duane Limpert had no details on the extent of injuries to the reporter, and he added that troops reported only minor injuries.

As the Aug. 15 deadline neared for finishing Iraq's new constitution, U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad called for it to protect women's rights, saying it was an important element for the country's success.

After meeting with representatives from some Iraqi women's groups, Khalilzad said they agreed that the equality of women "is a fundamental requirement for Iraq's progress."

The ambassador said that the U.S. government is expecting a constitution that would ensure full rights to all Iraqis, regardless of their sex, ethnicity or gender.

"My focus is to help get a constitution that does this. Of course, the Iraqis will decide but we will help in any way that we can," he said.

Khalilzad said his government would encourage Iraqi politicians to exclude any constitutional articles that discriminate or limit opportunities for any Iraqi citizens.

On Monday, women activists urged parliament to limit the role of Islam in the new constitution and follow international treaties on the rights of women and children.

With efforts exerted by religious parties to give Islam a central role in the Iraqi law, fears are growing that women would lose rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance.

Most worrying for women's groups has been the section on civil rights in the draft constitution, which some feel would significantly roll back women's rights under a 1959 civil law enacted by a secular regime.

Under Sharia law, women would inherit only half of what men receive. In issues of marriage and divorce, women would be at a significant disadvantage since only men would have the legal power to initiate divorces.

Khalilzad also called for more involvement by Arab Sunnis in the political process, stressing the necessity of national agreement on the future of Iraq as a way to divide and defeat the insurgency.

"In order to defeat the insurgency, one needs to reach a national compact, because if all Iraqis, including those who in western and central parts of the country see themselves as part of this new Iraq ... they will be separated from the insurgency," he said.

He accused insurgents of attempting to ignite a sectarian civil war in Iraq, adding that the solution to the insurgency problem should not be limited to military means.

"The military solution has to be integrated into a broad strategy that has a political element leading it, and of course, there are other elements."

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