

At least 200 people are believed dead and 800 more wounded yesterday after a suicide bombing near a mosque in central Najaf.

At 2.45pm Iraq time two men detonated explosives they were carrying as they ran towards the mosque. The explosion killed or injured hundreds of people and demolished part of the mosque's entrance. The casualties included 10-year-old children and four US soldiers officials said.

Ahmed Rami witnessed the bombing from outside the mosque. "I saw two men running towards the door together. They were young men, maybe not more than 25 years old. They shouted loudly and then came a huge explosion," said Mr. Rami.

At 11pm a group calling themselves the al-Hassan Brigades and claiming links to al-Qaeda took responsibility for the bombing. In a statement aired on Al-Jazeera the group demanded the immediate withdrawal of all coalition forces from Iraq.

An hour later, US Brigadier-

His ultimatum ended with a request for anyone with information about the command structure of the resistance to assist coalition forces.

Yesterday's bombing was the worst in Iraq since a police station bombing in Baghdad killed 83 people. The force of the explosion left "bodies lying everywhere" and created "noise and panic" according to one witness.

Hospital workers have been unable to cope with the high number of casualties. "There are too many dead bodies for us to deal with. We are trying to help the injured, but there is not enough clean water for us to do our jobs properly," said a spokesperson for Najaf's main hospital.

The bombing coincided with the end of a two-week Shiite Muslim pilgrimage. Approximately 80,000 pilgrims were in Najaf for the pilgrimage when the bomb exploded.

Najaf, a city of 560,000, is considered one of the Middle East's holiest cities. The tomb of Ali, the first imam of the Shiites, is in Najaf. In 791, a

General Mark Kimmitt, spokesman for the US-led coalition in Iraq said rebels from the Sunni stronghold town of Fallujah were believed responsible for the bombing.

300 US armoured vehicles reportedly surrounded Fallujah while another 5,000 US troops prepared for an assault on the town.

The US reaction to the bombing suggests the coalition is preparing to use force to prevent further attacks. "We are now saying to the insurgents in Fallujah very clearly: surrender or face the consequences. We are planning decisive action to end the resistance," Brigadier-General Kimmitt said.

grand mausoleum built atop Ali's tomb attracted pilgrims and clerics and the city became the pre-eminent centre of Shiite study.

In addition to Ali's tomb, Najaf is home to one of the world's largest cemeteries. Several Shiite prophets are buried there and it is believed that Ali endorsed the site as a part of heaven.