

NEWSIN brief

UN slams Lanka over asylum seekers

The UN refugee agency yesterday accused Sri Lanka of failing to respect international law by deporting 214 Afghan and Pakistan refugees before their asylum claims could be assessed. The agency said that returning an individual to a country where he or she would face a risk of torture was also prohibited under the UN's Convention Against Torture.

Syria troops kill at least 50 jihadists

Syrian troops backed by Hezbollah fighters have killed at least 50 jihadists from the Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front groups near the border with Lebanon, a monitor said yesterday. The clashes raged through the night and into the morning in the border region of Qalamun, said sources.

Subrata Roy sell iconic hotels to buy bail

Indian tycoon Subrata Roy, seeking to raise \$1.6 billion to win release from jail, has "interested" potential buyers for his iconic foreign properties that include New York's Plaza Hotel, a company official said yesterday. The Indian Supreme Court on Friday gave the founder of India's Sahara empire "10 working days" to use a special conference room at New Delhi's Tihar Jail complex "to negotiate sale of three foreign properties". Up for grabs are two famous hotels -- New York's Plaza Hotel and Grosvenor House in London -- along with the Dream Downtown NY.

Rape charges a fashion!

Indian right-wing Hindu party Shiv Sena yesterday said filing sexual assault charges has "become a fashion" in an article backing a police officer accused of rape. The headline Hindu nationalist outfit threw its support behind a senior state police officer accused of rape by a model and questioned the complainant's intentions. "Cases of charging men with molestation and rape in (high society) to create hype is on a rise now. It has almost become a fashion," the Shiv Sena wrote in its party mouthpiece, "Saamana" (To Confront).

Taiwan opens probe into huge gas blast

Taiwan's president yesterday promised a swift investigation into the cause of deadly gas explosions that rocked the island's densely populated second city, as residents accused local authorities of failing to avert the tragedy. The blasts sparked massive fires which tore through Kaohsiung's Cianjhen district late Thursday, killing at least 28 in the worst gas explosion ever in Taiwan.

Libya unrest 'worse than under Gaddafi': Evacuees

Britain closes embassy; thousands flee amid anarchy

Libya is descending into a civil war spiral that is "much worse" than the unrest that toppled its dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, residents fleeing the country told AFP yesterday. Meanwhile, Libya's new nationalist-dominated parliament held its first meeting yesterday, boycotted by Islamists, in a sign of deep divisions still plaguing the violence-wracked country from which thousands are fleeing. "We have gone through (war) before, with Gaddafi, but now it's much worse," Paraskevi Athineou, a Greek woman living in Libya, told AFP. "Chaos reigns. There is no government, we have no food, no fuel, no water, no electricity for hours on end," she said. Athineou was part of a group of 186 people evacuated from Tripoli by a Greek navy frigate which reached the port of Piraeus early on Saturday. In addition to 77 Greek nationals, there were 78 Chinese, 10 Britons, 12 Cypriots,



Top, An Arab-Israeli holds a doll wrapped in a white cloth, during a demonstration against Israel's military operations in Gaza in the northern Arab-Israeli village Tamra yesterday. Protests supporting the Palestinian people also held in Malaysia (left) and in US (right). More stories on page 1.



PHOTO: AFP

Landslide tragedy hits Nepal

Blocks river sparking flood fears; 8 killed, dozens missing

AFP, Kathmandu

A massive landslide in northeastern Nepal left at least eight people dead and dozens missing yesterday, burying a hydropower plant and putting several villages at risk of flash floods due to debris blocking a major river, officials said.

The landslide struck in the early hours, burying two dozen homes before dumping mud and stones into the Sunkoshi river, northeast of the capital Kathmandu, an official in the prime minister's office told AFP.

"We are trying to find a way to release the blocked water safely," said Prakash Adhikari, press adviser to the prime minister.

The debris has created a lake measuring at least three kilometres by 300 metres and already flooded a 2.6-megawatt hydropower plant on the river according to Himel Hydro, which built the project.

Officials scrambled to clear the river, fearing that two more power stations downstream could be damaged if the water level kept rising.

A police official at the scene of the disaster said electricity lines had snapped, leaving hundreds without power.

The government has declared the area a "flood crisis zone" and ordered the army to use explosives to try to clear the river.

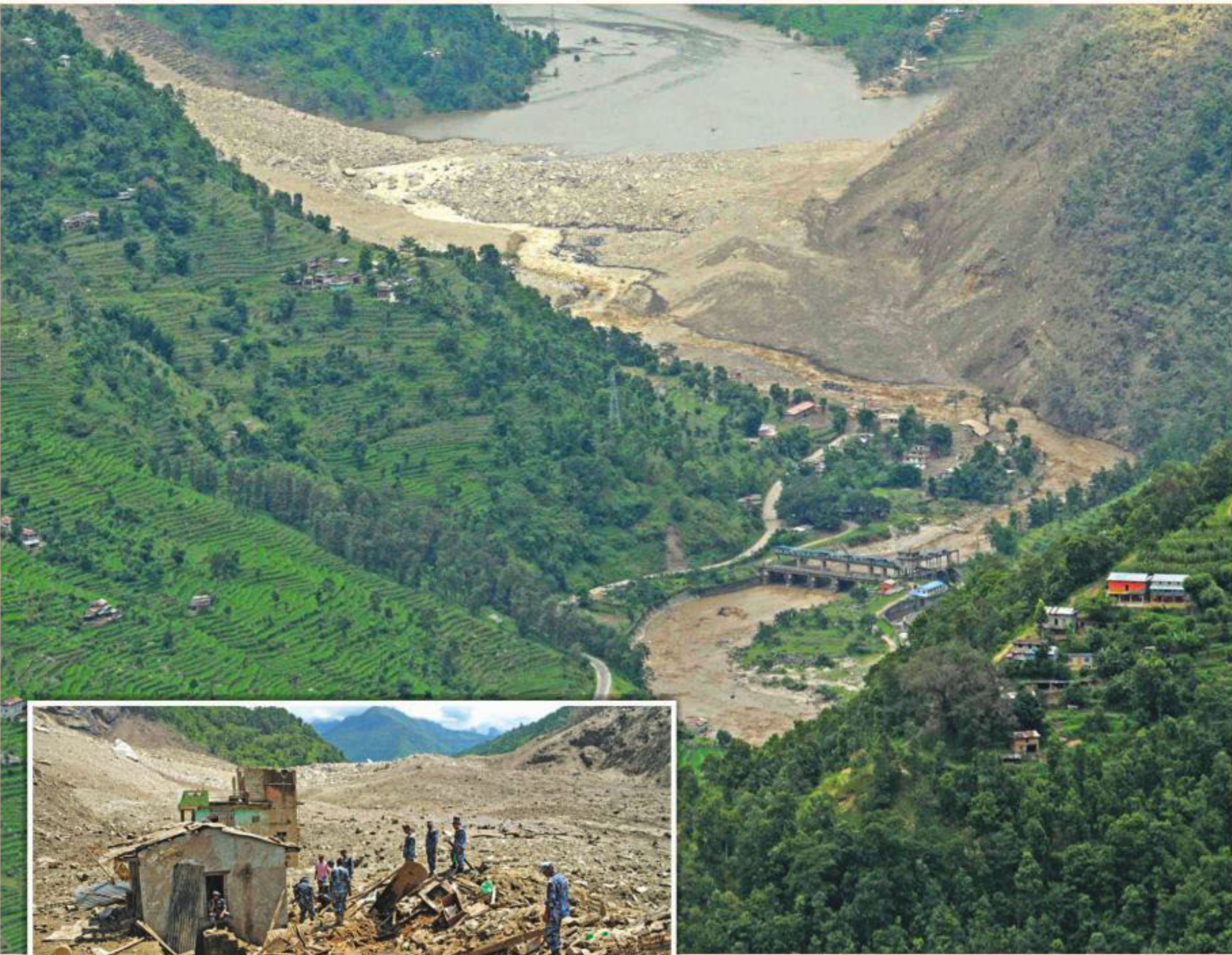
A portion of the Arniko Highway,

which connects the Himalayan nation with Tibet, has been closed, with concern mounting over risks to the Koshi barrage near the India-Nepal border, an official said.

Scores of people die every year from flooding and landslides during the monsoon season in Nepal.

At least 75 people were killed in separate incidents last year, when floods triggered by heavy rains struck homes in the country's remote hilly region and southern plains.

According to a team of US and Nepalese scientists, flash flooding which swept away an entire village in May 2012 originated with a minor rockslide that dammed a gorge and created a reservoir over several weeks.



The scene of a landslide on the Sukoshi river is seen from the air northeast of Nepal's capital Kathmandu, yesterday. Inset, Rescue personnel examine the site of the disaster.

PHOTO: AFP

China factory blast kills 68

AFP, Kunshan

A massive explosion killed 68 people yesterday as it ripped through a factory in eastern China, officials said, as badly burned victims were rushed to local hospitals.

The blast in Kunshan, a city in coastal Jiangsu province near Shanghai, also injured 187, in what appeared to be an industrial accident, state-broadcaster China Central Television reported.

State media said the plant produced car parts for automotive companies, including US giant General Motors.

The explosion began in a wheel hub polishing workshop, the official Xinhua news agency said.

Preliminary investigations show that the blast was caused by dust produced as workers polished metal meeting with high temperatures or an open flame, the ministry of public security said on a verified microblogging account.

Police sealed off the area around the factory, part of a development zone in northeast Kunshan, about 75 kilometres west of China's commercial hub Shanghai.

More than 260 workers were in the factory at the time, Kunshan mayor Lu Jun announced at a press conference.

The firm identified by CCTV, Taiwanese-invested Kunshan Zhongrong Metal Products Ltd. says on its website it employs 450 workers.

Two senior executives at the firm were detained by police, according to Xinhua.

Forty people were killed at the scene, while more than 20 others died in hospital, CCTV added, showing footage of a huge plume of black smoke.

Neither the company nor a spokeswoman for General Motors in China were immediately available for comment.

Obama-House row deepens over illegal immigrants

AFP, Washington

The US Congress has passed two measures to stem the flow of Central American children into the United States despite the strong objections of President Barack Obama, who vowed to address the crisis unilaterally.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives late Friday approved allocating \$694 million to deal with the influx of minors into the United States from Mexico. The measure was approved 223-189.

The amount is much less than the \$3.7 billion Obama requested to ease what he has called an "urgent humanitarian situation."

The House measure would increase funding for the Border Patrol and the National Guard, increase the number of immigration judges, and change a 2008 anti-trafficking law so the child migrants can be whisked home without deportation hearings.

The House also passed a measure gutting the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, a 2012 Obama administration scheme protecting young people who came to the United States illegally as children and who grew up in the country. The bill was approved 216-192. In a statement, the White House said the bill

could result in the deportation of hundreds of thousands of such youths, describing them as "Americans in every way but on paper."

Neither measure would likely be approved in the Senate or signed into law by the president in their current version. No further congressional action on immigration is expected until September.

Since October, more than 57,000 unaccompanied minors have been detained crossing the US-Mexico border, about three-quarters of them from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, Central American countries where youths are fleeing poverty and gang violence.

The House votes came just hours after Obama said he would redeploy existing resources to tackle the border crisis because of Congress's inaction.

"I'm going to have to act alone, because we don't have enough resources," Obama said. "We've run out

of money."

The border crisis has emerged as a hot-button topic ahead of the November mid-term elections, where control of the Senate is at stake.

US politicians widely agree that federal immigration laws badly need reforming, but disagree sharply on what needs to be done.

'We tortured some folks'

Admits Obama, says US does not control everything

AGENCIES

President Barack Obama acknowledged Friday that US intelligence operatives had "tortured some folks" in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, but urged they not be judged too harshly.

The US administration is expected to release a declassified Senate report in the coming days that will detail abuses by intelligence agents targeting the Islamist extremist group Al-Qaeda, according to AFP.

"Even before I came into office, I was very clear that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, we did some things that were wrong," Obama told reporters.

"We did a whole lot of things that were right, but we tortured some folks. We did some things that were contrary to our values."

"When we engaged in some of these enhanced interrogation techniques, techniques that I believe and I think any fair-minded person would believe were torture, we crossed a line."

Apparently preparing the ground for the report, which lawmakers say they expect to be made public within days, Obama said intelligence personnel had been under extreme pressure in 2001 and after.

Meanwhile, defending his administration's foreign policy in view of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and the Gaza conflict, Obama has said that the US does not control everything that happens across the globe despite being the most powerful country.

"Apparently people have forgotten that America, as the most powerful country on Earth, still does not control everything around the world," Obama told White House reporters at a news conference, reported TNN.

"So our diplomatic efforts often take time. They often will see progress and then a step backwards. That's been true in the Middle East. That's been true in Europe. That's been true in Asia. That's the nature of world affairs. It's not neat, and it's not smooth," he said when asked if the United States has lost its influence in the world.

"But if you look at, for example, Ukraine, we have made progress in delivering on what we said we would do. We can't control how (Vladimir) Putin thinks."

"But what we can do is say to Putin, if you continue on the path of arming separatists with heavy armaments that violates international law and undermines the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, then you're going to face consequences that will hurt your country," he said.

Obama said in the 20th century and the early part of this century, there are a lot of conflicts that America did not resolve.

"That's always been true. That doesn't mean we stop trying. It is not a measure of American influence on any given day or at any given moment that there are conflicts around the world that are difficult," he said.

In UK, 1,500 babies born addicted to drugs

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

More than 1,500 babies are born addicted to drugs every year, NHS figures show.

They include cases where doctors have been forced to give opiates to babies in order to wean them off heroin. More than 7,800 newborns have been recorded with "neonatal withdrawal symptoms" in the last five years, effectively putting them into cold turkey after becoming dependent on drugs their mothers took during pregnancy.

They include 6,599 cases in England, 738 in Scotland and 464 cases in Wales, according to data.

The latest figures mark a 22% increase in cases over the last 10 years, from 1,192 in 2004-5 to 1,536 in the past 12 months.

"The 1,500 innocent babies born into the trauma of addiction each year are being given a tragic start in life. It demonstrates that addiction is not just about individual choice - it affects children, families, communities," said Centre for Social Justice thinktank.

The figures follow a study earlier this year which found that, during the first three months of pregnancy, more than half of women drink more than the recommended amount of alcohol. Women who had more than two units a week were twice as likely to give birth to unexpectedly small or premature babies as women who did not drink at all.



Libya unrest 'worse than under Gaddafi': Evacuees

Britain closes embassy; thousands flee amid anarchy

Libya is descending into a civil war spiral that is "much worse" than the unrest that toppled its dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, residents fleeing the country told AFP yesterday. Meanwhile, Libya's new nationalist-dominated parliament held its first meeting yesterday, boycotted by Islamists, in a sign of deep divisions still plaguing the violence-wracked country from which thousands are fleeing. "We have gone through (war) before, with Gaddafi, but now it's much worse," Paraskevi Athineou, a Greek woman living in Libya, told AFP. "Chaos reigns. There is no government, we have no food, no fuel, no water, no electricity for hours on end," she said. Athineou was part of a group of 186 people evacuated from Tripoli by a Greek navy frigate which reached the port of Piraeus early on Saturday. In addition to 77 Greek nationals, there were 78 Chinese, 10 Britons, 12 Cypriots,

LIBYA IN CRISIS

seven Belgians, one Albanian and a Russian. Among them were several diplomats, including the Chinese ambassador to Libya. Libya has suffered chronic insecurity since Gaddafi's overthrow in 2011, with the new government unable to check militias that helped to remove him and facing a growing threat from Islamist groups.

"So many people died to make the country better. But now we started killing each other in a civil war," said Osama Monsour, a 35-year-old employed at a non-governmental organisation in Tripoli.

Fighting between rival militias in Tripoli has forced the closure of the city's international airport,

while Islamist groups are also battling army special forces in the eastern city of Benghazi. The British Embassy is also closing its embassy in Tripoli amid escalating violence in the Libyan capital, according to The Independent.

Many staff members were evacuated earlier this week and British citizens have been told to leave the country immediately.

IS seizes oilfields from Iraq Kurds

AFP, Arbil

Islamic State jihadist fighters seized two small oilfields in northern Iraq yesterday after a fierce battle with Kurdish peshmerga forces, Kurdish officials said.

The jihadist attack launched late Friday on the Zumar area, northwest of Mosul, Iraq's second city, drew Kurdish forces deeper into a conflict which has raged for close to two months.

14 peshmerga fighters were killed in the fighting. The PUK official said the peshmerga killed "around 100" IS fighters and captured 38.

The officials said the peshmerga fought off the jihadists, only to withdraw later yesterday, allowing IS fighters to take control of the area, which includes the Ain Zalah and Batma fields.

"The two oilfields are now under IS control," an official with the North Oil Co told AFP, adding the fields have a combined capacity of 20,000 barrels per day.

IS fighters, who run large swathes of neighbouring Syria, launched a blistering offensive on June 9 that saw them capture Mosul and move into much of Iraq's Sunni heartland.

Government forces retreated in the face of the onslaught, with peshmerga troops filling the vacuum and seizing long-coveted areas disputed by the Kurds and Baghdad, including the oilfields.

The peshmerga are widely perceived as Iraq's best organised and most efficient military force but the autonomous Kurdish region in the north has been cash-strapped and its troops stretched.

According to the United Nations, 1,186 civilians were among 1,737 people who died in violence across the country in July.