

'Human catastrophe' in Fallujah

Warn UN, aid groups; militants put up tough resistance as forces press assault

AGENCIES
A "human catastrophe" is looming in Fallujah as up to 50,000 civilians remain trapped in the IS-held Iraqi city during a continuing government assault.

Families who have managed to escape said fighters from the so-called Islamic State had sealed exit points and shot anyone attempting to flee since the start of Operation Breaking Terrorism last week.

Militants are reported to be holding several hundred families as "human shields" in the city while government forces close in, the United Nations refugee agency said yesterday, citing witness accounts.

Some 3,700 people have fled Falluja, west of Baghdad, over the



Civilians who fled their Falluja homes gather in the town of Garma, Iraq, on Monday. PHOTO: REUTERS

back vigorously overnight and parried an onslaught by the Iraqi army on a southern district of Falluja, officers said.

As well as using the trapped civilians as human shields against approaching Iraqi forces, Shia militias and coalition air strikes, there were reports of militants forcing families to move with IS forces from one location to another.

Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who was the UK Special Envoy for Iraq from 2003 to 2004, told Radio 4's Today programme that "renegades" from Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party and Sunni tribes were also present in

Fallujah and would resist the government's offensive.

"It's bound to be a very destructive campaign," he said. "There's no way of re-taking Fallujah by the Iraqi security forces without serious harm to the civilian population."

Iraqi counter-terror forces started moving into the city in the early hours of Monday morning, mortar fire and with air support from the US-led coalition.

There have been no confirmed casualty figures, with both sides claiming to have killed dozens of enemy fighters but no official mention of civilian deaths.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which is working in displacement camps at Amiriyat Al Fallujah, has warned that there are few safe routes for evacuations as the city is attacked from three directions.

"A human catastrophe is unfolding in Fallujah. Families are caught in the crossfire with no safe way out," said general secretary Jan Egeland.

"Warring parties must guarantee civilians safe exit now, before it's too late and more lives are lost."

Families have trekked for hours under the cover of darkness, moving through fields and hiding in disused irrigation pipes, but women and children are among many believed

to have been killed or flogged for attempting to escape.

Conditions for those left inside Fallujah were described as "dire", with a severe lack of food, clean drinking water and medicine.

UNHCR said that stories of extreme desperation were emerging, with rocketing food prices of more than \$40 for a kilo of flour forcing people to search rubbish and eat rotten food.

Save the Children said the price of a single can of infant milk had hit £35 at times during the siege and that potatoes and sugar cost between ten to fifteen times more than normal, forcing families to eat soup made from grass or a handful of seeds.

Some residents have reportedly killed themselves, while parents are said to have drowned their children in the river or abandoned them because they could not feed them.

The UNHCR has also received reports of a dramatic increase in of executions of men and boys for refusing to fight for IS and "many" people dying in air strikes or buried alive under the rubble of their homes.

Fallujah, lying around 40 miles west of Baghdad, was the first Iraqi city to be taken by IS in its January 2014 offensive and is the group's largest stronghold in Iraq after Mosul.



Migrant deaths in Med up sharply

AFP, Geneva

More than 2,500 people have died trying to make the perilous journey across the Mediterranean to Europe so far in 2016, the UN said yesterday, a sharp jump from the same period last year.

At the same time some 204,000 migrants and refugees have crossed the Mediterranean to the continent since January, a figure that has also climbed acutely.

In the past week alone, at least 880 people have died in a series of shipwrecks, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said, citing information from survivors who made it to Italy.

"I emphasise that that figure is a conservative estimate," UNHCR spokesman William Spindler told reporters.

A number of small children reportedly drowned in the series of boat accidents over the past week, as thousands continue to attempt the sea crossing to Europe in rickety vessels from the Middle East and Africa.

Spindler warned that "2016 is proving to be particularly deadly," saying that during the first five months of 2015, the death toll stood at 1,855, while the number during the same period in 2014 was 57.

Counting all routes across the Mediterranean, Spindler said the odds of dying while trying to cross to Europe was now one in 81.

WAR ON IS IN IRAQ

UN says civilians are being used as human shields
Starvation, forced-recruitment, executions reported inside the city
Kurd-Arab alliance gains ground in Mosul assault

NEWS IN brief

Pak PM undergoes open heart surgery
AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif underwent open heart surgery in a London hospital yesterday, his second cardiac procedure in five years, his daughter said. Sharif has been accompanied to London by his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, who is chief minister of Punjab province, and several other family members and aides.

Poland makes new bid to extradite Polanski
AFP, Warsaw

Poland yesterday launched a fresh bid to extradite Oscar-winning director Roman Polanski to the United States to face sentencing over a 1977 case of statutory rape. Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro announced he has appealed to the Supreme Court to overturn an October ruling that Polanski should not face extradition, saying no-one should be above the law.

Saudi intercepts missile from Yemen: coalition
AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia intercepted a ballistic missile fired from Yemen on Monday night, the military coalition supporting the Yemeni government against rebels said. It was the second missile launch from Yemen since UN-brokered peace talks began in Kuwait on April 21 between the Huthi Shia rebels and the government of President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi.

Ex-Miss Turkey gets jail 'for insulting Erdogan'

AFP, Istanbul

A Turkish court yesterday found a former Miss Turkey beauty queen guilty of insulting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on social media, handing her a suspended sentence of over one year in jail. The "Master's Poem" -- which was shared by Merve Buyuksarac, 27, while Erdogan was serving as prime minister -- criticises the Turkish strongman with verses adapted from the national anthem.

Afghan Taliban kill 16 bus passengers

Kidnap dozens; 50 cops killed in clashes
AFP, Kunduz

The Taliban yesterday killed at least 16 people and kidnapped dozens of others after pulling them off buses in northern Afghanistan, officials said, the latest assault since the insurgents named a new leader last week.

The Taliban have so far not commented on the incident in Alibiad district in the volatile province of Kunduz. Up to 200 passengers were travelling in four buses towards Kabul yesterday morning when they were stopped by the Taliban gunmen, with some killed on the side of the road at point-blank range, officials said.

"The Taliban shot dead 16 passengers and they are still holding more than 30 others," said Sayed Mahmood Danish, spokesman for the governor of Kunduz.

The identities of the passengers have not been confirmed. But sources said former police officials were among the killed. Highways around Afghanistan passing through insurgency-prone areas have become exceedingly dangerous, with the Taliban and other armed groups frequently kidnapping or killing travellers.

The incident comes a day after the Taliban overran multiple police checkpoints in Helmand killing more than 50.

As many as 24 police were killed on Monday, and another 33 killed on Sunday, with nearly 40 injured, regional police commander Esmatullah Dawlatzai told Reuters.

Study: India has 18.35m modern slaves

AFP, Sydney

India has the highest number of modern slaves with an estimated 18.35m followed by China with 3.39m and Pakistan with 2.13m, a study showed yesterday.

According to the 2016 Global Slavery Index, a research report by the Walk Free Foundation, more than 45 million men, women and children globally are trapped in modern slavery, with two-thirds in the Asia-Pacific.

The report compiled information from 167 countries. Modern slavery refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot leave because of threats, violence, coercion, abuse of power or deception. They may be held in debt bondage on fishing boats, against their will as domestic servants or trapped in brothels.

'Russian raids' kill 23 civilians

Moscow denies allegation; IS loses ground to Kurd-led fighters
AFP, Beirut

Russian air strikes pounded an al-Qaeda-held city in northwestern Syria overnight, killing 23 civilians, a monitoring group said yesterday, but Moscow denied it was responsible.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said dozens of civilians were also wounded in the raids on Idlib, a provincial capital held by al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front and its allies since March last year.

But the Russian defence ministry denied its aircraft had carried out any strikes on the city. "Russian aviation did not carry out any military operations, still less air strikes, in Idlib province," military spokesman Igor Konashenkov said in a statement.

Al-Nusra is not party to a Russian- and US-brokered ceasefire that went into force on February 27 between Moscow-backed government forces and Washington-backed non-jihadist rebels.

"The air strikes are the most intensive on Idlib since the beginning of the truce," Observatory chief Rami Abdel

Rahman told AFP. "Even though Idlib is not covered by the truce, it had been relatively calm with only intermittent raids," he added.

The Observatory said five children were among those killed in the strikes, which hit several residential areas and near a hospital and a public garden.

Meanwhile, US-backed Kurdish-led fighters have seized ground from the Islamic State group in Syria, the monitor said yesterday, as the jihadists come under attack in their Fallujah bastion in neighbouring Iraq.

The Syrian Democratic Forces who control a swathe of territory along the Turkish border launched a push south towards the IS stronghold of Raqa last week, capturing a string of villages in the north of Raqa province.

"The SDF has captured 12 villages... northwest of Raqa in the past 36 hours," Rami Abdel

Rahman told AFP. Abdel Rahman said that the villages lie 80 kilometres or more from Raqa itself but that the jihadists' de facto Syria capital was not the immediate goal.



Syrian Civil Defence members yesterday search for survivors amid the rubble following reported Russian air strikes the previous night on the Syrian northwestern city of Idlib. PHOTO: AFP



Internally-displaced Afghan children pose for a photo at a refugee camp in Kabul yesterday. The number of people internally displaced by war in Afghanistan has doubled since 2012 to 1.2 million, Amnesty International said yesterday, citing government neglect and a lack of international attention. In its report entitled "My children will die this winter: Afghanistan's broken promise to the displaced", the rights group warned that a lack of basic services had pushed many of those uprooted from their homes to the brink of survival.

Fire at arms depot kills 16 in India

AFP, Mumbai

A massive fire that erupted at one of India's largest military ammunition depots yesterday killed at least 16 soldiers and firefighters, reigniting safety concerns about military equipment and installations.

The blaze broke out in the early hours at the high-security facility which stores bombs, grenades and other ordnance outside the central city of Pulgaon. Flames lit up the night sky.

Thousands of families were evacuated from nearby towns and villages in the western state of Maharashtra for fear of secondary explosions at the huge depot.

India's director general of military operations, Ranbir Singh, said two army officers, one soldier and 13 firefighters were killed in the blaze, updating earlier reports quoting officials of 17 soldiers dead.

Two officers and 15 personnel... were also injured" and taken to hospital, Lieutenant General Singh told reporters in New Delhi.

A probe has been ordered into the cause of the blaze, which started at 1:00 am and was confined to one of the numerous sheds storing "highly sensitive ammunition", an army statement said.

Firefighters using 10 engines worked through the night to contain the blaze which was finally brought under control just over five hours later, Ramesh Barde, a fire officer from the nearby city of Nagpur, told AFP.

The facility, spread over 2,800 hectares, is one of the largest in India and provides ammunition for the army, navy and air force. Trains transport stockpiles on kilometres of railways lines around its grounds, according to an expert.

India's armed forces have a history of fires and other accidents which are sometimes blamed on lax safety standards. Yesterday's was the worst incident since a submarine fire killed 18 sailors three years ago.

Suu Kyi to lead new effort to bring peace in Rakhine

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi will lead a new effort to bring peace and development to Rakhine State where violence between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims in recent years has cast a cloud over progress on democratic reforms.

More than 100 people were killed in violence in the western state in 2012, and some 125,000 Rohingya Muslims, who are stateless, took refuge in camps where their movements are severely restricted.

Thousands have fled persecution and poverty in an exodus by boat to neighbouring South and Southeast Asian countries.

Suu Kyi, who holds the office of state counsellor, will lead a new Central Committee for Implementation of Peace and Development in Rakhine State, the President's Office said in an online announcement yesterday.

The group will consist of 27 officials,

Donald Trump's popularity baffles Stephen Hawking

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Stephen Hawking has said the popularity of "demagogue" Donald Trump is beyond even his understanding.

The world-famous theoretical physicist has made no secret of his disdain for the likely Republican Party presidential nominee - previously joking about his intelligence.

Asked if his knowledge of the universe meant he could explain the popular appeal of the billionaire tycoon, he told ITV's Good Morning Britain: "I can't... He is a demagogue, who seems to appeal to the lowest common denominator."

Professor Hawking also renewed his appeal to British voters to back remaining in the EU for the sake of science, as well as for economic and security reasons.

"Gone are the days we could stand on our own, against the world. We need to be part of a larger group of nations, both for our security, and our trade," he said.



Duterte endorses killing of corrupt journos

AFP, Davao

Philippine president-elect Rodrigo Duterte yesterday said that corrupt journalists were legitimate targets of assassination, as he amped up his anti-crime crusade with bounty offers for the deaths of drug traffickers.

In a press conference called to announce his cabinet in his southern hometown of Davao, Duterte said journalists who took bribes or engaged in other corrupt activities also deserved to die.

"Just because you're a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you're a son of a bitch," Duterte said when asked how he would address the problem of media killings in the Philippines after a reporter was shot dead in Manila last week.

The Philippines is one of the most dangerous nations in the world for journalists, with 174 murdered since a chaotic and corruption-plagued democracy replaced the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos three decades ago.

Duterte won this month's elections by a landslide largely due to an explosive law-and-order platform in which he pledged to end crime within six months by killing tens of thousands of criminals.

Duterte also said freedom of expression provisions in the constitution did not necessarily protect a person from violent repercussions for defamation.

"If you are an upright journalist, nothing will happen to you," said Duterte, who has ruled Davao as mayor for most of the past two decades and is accused of links to vigilante death squads.