



WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ Forces retake Fallujah HQ

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi forces raised the national flag over the main government compound in Fallujah yesterday, top commanders said, a breakthrough in the nearly four-week-old offensive against the Islamic State group's bastion.

They met limited resistance from IS fighters, who were fleeing the city, the commanders told AFP, leaving the organisation on the brink of losing one of the most emblematic strongholds in its two-year-old "caliphate".

It is the latest setback for the jihadists who have also lost territory in neighbouring Syria and in Libya in recent weeks, although US Central Intelligence Agency director John Brennan warned on Thursday that they remain a formidable force with global reach.

Officials said the Iraqi flag was raised above government buildings in the compound and claimed that "Iraqi forces have now liberated 70 percent of the city."

In the deserted, recently reconquered neighbourhoods of the insurgent bastion known in Iraq as the "City of Mosques", elite forces were consolidating positions, stocking up on food and weapons.

Dozens of bodies of dead IS fighters were left to rot under blankets amid the rubble of homes destroyed by air strikes, rockets or controlled explosions of the hundreds of bombs the jihadists themselves laid across the city.

The government lost control of Fallujah in 2014, months before IS took second city Mosul and swept across large parts of the country.

Fallujah, which lies just 50 kilometres west of Baghdad, is one of IS's key historical bastions and its loss would leave Mosul as the only major Iraqi city under its control.

The US-led coalition, which has carried out air strikes in support of the Fallujah operation, had initially favoured focusing efforts on recapturing Mosul.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who was facing huge political pressure over the reform of his own government when he declared the launch of the Fallujah operation, has vowed to defeat IS nationwide by the end of the year.

Security officials said many IS members had managed to slip out of the city by blending in with fleeing civilians in recent days, in some cases paying off security forces.

Tens of thousands of civilians have been forced from their homes since the start of the operation last month.

The first to escape IS rule were those living in rural outlying areas, in the early phase of the operation which saw a myriad different Iraqi forces seal the siege of the city.

Residents of the city centre had been trapped in dire conditions for days but recent advances have allowed large numbers to escape.

There were an estimated 50,000 people in the city when the operation was launched but it is unclear how many remain now.

Bomb Syria regime

Urges US diplomats breaking ranks as truce falters

AFP, Washington

Dozens of US diplomats think America should launch military strikes against the Syrian government, according to a State Department document, breaking ranks with President Barack Obama's policy on the bloody civil war.

The so-called "dissent channel" cable urges attacks against Bashar al-Assad's regime for its persistent violations of a shaky ceasefire aimed at bringing an end to the five-year conflict.

The cable, signed by working-level diplomats, demands "a judicious use of stand-off and air weapons", according to the New York Times, and lays bare the divisions in Washington policy circles.

With only seven months left in office and a clear aversion to getting bogged down in Middle East conflicts, Obama has shown little appetite for such action.

But the administration's alternative policy -- to work with Russia to secure a ceasefire in Syria's five-year civil war and talks on a political transition -- has made little headway.

That policy received a further blow when Assad's Russian allies launched raids in southern Syria, according to the

Pentagon.

US policy on Syria has been criticised for ineffectiveness, after five years of brutal internecine fighting that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and sent many more fleeing.

The State Department cable says Assad's continued violation of a country-wide partial ceasefire -- a cessation of hostilities -- that was negotiated in February, meant a political settlement was untenable, the Times reported.

Without consequences for the violations, the regime will feel no compunction to talk with moderate opponents, the cable said, with their barrel bombing of civilians the "root cause of the instability that continues to grip Syria and the broader region."

That came hours after US Secretary of State John Kerry warned Moscow that Washington's patience was running out over breaches of the nationwide ceasefire.

The Wall Street Journal said 51 mid- to high-level senior State Department officials signed the memo submitted via the "dissent channel", which allows diplomats who disagree with official policy to lodge concerns without fear of retribution.



EGYPTAIR CRASH Second black box recovered

AFP, Cairo

Search teams yesterday recovered the second flight recorder of an EgyptAir plane from the bottom of the Mediterranean that could prove vital in establishing the cause of the crash.

Flight MS804 from Paris to Cairo disappeared from radar screens in the eastern Mediterranean last month with 66 people on board, and a vast search operation has since scoured swathes of sea off Egypt's northern coast.

Egyptian investigators said search teams managed to recover the Airbus A320's flight data recorder -- which gathers information about the speed, altitude and direction of the plane -- a day after they retrieved its cockpit voice recorder.

The data recorder, which experts see as a vital part of the probe, was found in several pieces, according to investigators.

MSF rejects EU funds over migrant deal

AFP, Brussels

Medical aid group Doctors Without Borders yesterday said it would no longer take funds from the EU in protest at its "shameful" policies on the migration crisis, including a deal with Turkey.

The charity, widely known by its French acronym MSF (Medecins Sans Frontieres), received 56 million euros (\$63 million) from European Union institutions and the 28 member states last year.

"MSF announces today that we will no longer take funds from the EU and its member states in protest at their shameful deterrence policies and their intensification of efforts to push people and their suffering back from European shores," the group said in a statement.

The Nobel Peace Prize-winning MSF singled out the EU's deal with Turkey in March to stem the biggest flow of migrants into the continent since World War II, many of them from war-torn Syria.

"This is really about Europe's refugee shame," Jerome Oberreit, international secretary general of MSF, told a press conference in Brussels. He accused member states of a "shameful European response focused on deterrence rather than providing people with the assistance and protection they need."

"The EU-Turkey deal goes one step further and has placed the very concept of 'refugee' and the protection it offers in danger," Oberreit added.

MSF has been heavily involved in caring for migrants in locations including the Greek island of Lesbos and the French port of Calais, as well as operating a boat called the Argos which saves lives in the Mediterranean.

Under the Turkey deal, Ankara agreed to take back all migrants and refugees landing in the Greek islands who did not apply for asylum, and to crack down on people smuggling across the Aegean Sea.



Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron (2nd L) leads Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn (R) to pay tribute near the scene where Labour Member of Parliament Jo Cox was killed in Birstall near Leeds, in Britain; Labour MP's react while visiting the site; and a Union flag is pictured in the northern England town, yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

170,000 ACCESSORY TO MURDER CHARGES

Auschwitz guard, 94, jailed for five years

AFP, Detmold

A former SS guard was yesterday convicted by a German court for complicity in the mass murders at Auschwitz death camp, capping what is likely one of the last Holocaust trials.

More than 70 years after World War II, Reinhold Hanning, 94, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment over his role at the Nazi-run camp in occupied Poland.

"The accused is sentenced to five years' jail for accessory to murder in 170,000 cases," ruled the court in the western German city of Detmold.

During the four-month trial, which involved witnesses giving harrowing accounts of the living hell they faced, prosecutors outlined how Hanning had watched over the selection of prisoners deemed fit for slave labour, and those sent to the gas chambers.

They also accused him of knowing about the regular mass shootings and the system-

atic starvation of prisoners. Unlike previous trials of officers who personally sent people to the gas chambers, this case covered the broader organisation of the extermination camp, where inmates were also starved to death or killed in summary executions.

In April, Hanning himself broke his silence, speaking for the first time about his time at Auschwitz in court.

Telling victims "I am sorry," he admitted to the court that he knew prisoners were being shot and gassed and that their bodies were burned at the camp.

"I am ashamed that I let this injustice happen and did nothing to prevent it," he told the court.

More than one million European Jews were killed at Auschwitz. Yet, of the camp's 6,500 SS personnel who survived the war, fewer than 50 were ever convicted.



HONOUR KILLINGS IN PAKISTAN

Now, parents kill pregnant woman

AFP, Lahore

Relatives slit the throat of a young mother who was pregnant with her second child after she married against their will in eastern Pakistan, officials said yesterday, the latest in a spate of so-called "honour killings".

Muqaddas Bibi, 22, married Taufiq Ahmed three years ago in defiance of her family, who considered a marriage for love -- rather than an arranged marriage -- shameful, police investigator Mohammad Arshad told AFP.

Bibi's ties with her family were severed after the marriage, Arshad said, but her mother and brother allegedly approached her at a clinic where she was having a check-up on Thursday and convinced her to come home, saying they accepted her decision.

Local police station chief Gohar Abbas said that when Bibi reached her parents' house, her father, brother and mother cut her throat with a knife and she died on the spot.

Bibi had a 10-month old daughter and was seven months pregnant when she was killed, he added.

Abbas said that her family fled from their house after the murder in the village of Buttaranwali, some 75 kilometres north of Punjab provincial capital Lahore.

Police are hunting for them and have already detained another relative for inciting the killing, he said.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Sanders vows to work with Clinton

AFP, Washington

Liberal White House hopeful Bernie Sanders declined to bow out of his race against Hillary Clinton on Thursday, declaring that his "political revolution must continue" and urging supporters to help reform the Democratic Party.

But he stressed that he was prepared to work with his rival in order to best presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump.

"The major political task that we face in the next five months is to make certain that Donald Trump is defeated and defeated badly," Sanders said in a webcast to supporters.

"And I personally intend to begin my role in that process in a very short period of time."

Former secretary of state Clinton has for all intents and purposes won their at-times bitter battle for the Democratic nomination.

Last week she clinched the number of delegates needed to become the party flagbearer next month at its national convention, and she shifted weeks ago to her likely showdown against Trump.

The self-described democratic socialist Sanders urged his millions of backers to keep taking on the political establishment.

"We must continue our grassroots efforts to create the America that we know we can become. And we must take that energy into the Democratic National Convention on July 25 in Philadelphia," he said.

The 74-year-old Vermont senator launched an idealistic, visionary presidential campaign last year, and he was given little hope of making a major impact.

ORLANDO SHOOTING

I don't care about politics: Obama

AFP, Orlando

President Barack Obama travelled to grief-stricken Orlando Thursday, meeting loved ones devastated by a shooting rampage and using his bully pulpit to demand that the Republican-controlled Congress pass gun control.

Four days after the worst mass shooting in US history, Obama made a solemn pilgrimage to meet staff at the Pulse nightclub, emergency responders and some of the dozens of families shattered by gunman Omar Mateen.

Forty-nine people were killed and 53 wounded when the 29-year-old Mateen -- a Muslim American of Afghan descent -- ran amok in a packed gay nightclub early Sunday, armed with a legally bought assault rifle.

Mateen -- who pledged allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State group during the attack -- was killed in a police raid.

But his assault has fuelled America's poisonous partisan culture wars, prompting new salvos in bitter election-year rows over immigration, counterterrorism and guns.

After meeting the victims' families, Obama said "our hearts are broken too" and insisted the tone of the country's hyper-partisan debate on firearms "needs to change."

Relatives of the victims "don't care about the politics. And neither do I," he said. Obama insisted the military would tackle the Islamic State group, al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in their hideouts, and intelligence services would work to disrupt such networks.

But, he warned, the government could not catch every "deranged person."

"We can do something about the amount of damage that they do," he said. "Unfortunately our politics have conspired to make it as easy as possible for a terrorist or just a disturbed individual like those in Aurora and Newtown to buy extraordinarily powerful weapons and they can do so legally."

The Republican-controlled Congress has steadfastly refused to pass any gun legislation, saying to do so would infringe on the constitutional rights of gun owners.

Frustrated Democrats took to the Senate floor Wednesday to launch a procedural obstruction, known as a filibuster, to pressure Republicans to accept so-called "no-fly, no buy" legislation that would bar those on watch lists or no-fly lists from purchasing firearms.



'The Floating Piers': Artist lets you walk on water

REUTERS, Sulzano

Ever fancied walking on water? Well now you can, thanks to Bulgarian-born artist Christo's latest art installation providing a floating walkway at Italy's Lake Iseo.

For just a few weeks, "The Floating Piers" will rest on the surface of the picturesque lake, 100 km northeast of Milan, with a 3-km walkway allowing visitors to set off from the mainland town of Sulzano to the islands of Monte Isola and San Paolo, usually accessed by boat.

Some 220,000 high-density polyethylene cubes have been attached together and anchored by divers for the project. Covering them are 100,000 square metres (1,076,391 square feet) of shimmering yellow fabric, which will also feature along 1.5 km of Sulzano streets.

The piers, some 16 metres (52 feet) wide and 35 centimetres (14 inches) high, will "undulate with the movement of the waves" as visitors make their way, according to the project's website.

They will be on display June 18-July 3.

Works by Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude, who died in 2009, have featured in various cities, such as "The Gates" in New York, where the artists put up 7,503 gates with saffron fabric panels in Central Park.

According to the project's website, Christo and Jeanne-Claude came up with "The Floating Piers" concept in 1970 and Christo picked Lake Iseo as the location in 2014.

Access to "The Floating Piers" will be free and organisers say volunteers will be present in case anyone should fall into the water.