



Displaced Iraqis flee their homes as Iraqi forces battle with Islamic State militants, in western Mosul, Iraq, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Hungry and afraid, Mosul civilians flee

AFP, Hamam Al-alil

The gunshot rang out as civilians tried to escape the west of Mosul, where Iraqi forces are battling jihadists, killing a father as he fled with his family.

"The sniper shot him in the head. His family was all around him, the children and his wife, they were crying," said Maysun, who saw the shooting as she fled Mosul's Maamun neighbourhood.

"They didn't want to leave his side, but we made them continue because it was so dangerous," the 35-year-old told AFP at a camp for the displaced near Iraq's second city.

More than 28,000 people have streamed out of west Mosul since February 19, when security forces began a push to wrest control from the Islamic State group, according to International Organization for Migration figures.

They are fleeing fighting and food shortages, but they face horrifying scenes as they leave.

"There were bodies in the street as we walked, children, pieces of bodies," said Safana, 23, as she waited in a food distribution queue in the Hamam Al-Alil camp.

She said IS fighters had told people to leave her neighbourhood of Maamun in west Mosul.

Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service has faced "fierce" resistance from IS in southwest Mosul, and the jihadists have targeted fleeing civilians, according to senior commander Staff Lieutenant General Abdulghani al-Assadi.

He told AFP around 15 fleeing civilians had been killed by jihadists in the past 10 days, with more wounded.

Safana, who like many of those fleeing Mosul declined to give her family name, said civilians had been trapped in their homes during heavy clashes.

"Our neighbour's house was hit by a mortar round and the whole house collapsed on top of them."

"We managed to pull out two wounded people," her sister Shaimaa interjected.



"But all the rest were dead, and their bodies are still under the rubble."

Among those killed elsewhere in the area known as the Maamun Flats was 10-year-old Rusud Saddam, whose mother was inconsolable as she walked along a highway to reach transport to a camp for the displaced.

"My daughter was standing in the corridor in the house... the mortar round hit and she's gone," she wept from behind a black face veil.

"They broke my heart... I left her in the cemetery. I left her in the cemetery and I came."

Many of the displaced described surviving on a single meal a day.

"We had virtually no food and Daesh fighters came into our house and took what we had left," said Khaled Mohamed, 24, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Samir said civilians were arriving hungry, thirsty and traumatised.

"They're suffering physically and psychologically, from what they've seen -- torture, executions, death."

Syrian troops take Palmyra

AFP, Beirut

Syrian troops backed by Russian jets completed the recapture of the historic city of Palmyra from the Islamic State group yesterday, the Kremlin and the army said, in another blow to the jihadists.

Bolstered by air strikes and ground troops from their ally Moscow, Syrian forces battled through the desert for weeks to reach Palmyra.

The oasis city has traded hands several times during Syria's six-year civil war and become a symbol of IS's wanton destruction of priceless cultural heritage in areas under its control.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu informed President Vladimir Putin of Palmyra's recapture, a Kremlin spokesman told news agencies in Moscow.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitoring group, said the jihadists had totally withdrawn from the desert city but not before mining several areas.

"The Syrian army is still clearing neighbourhoods of mines and has not spread out into the whole city yet," said its director, Rami Abdel Rahman.

An army statement carried on state news agency SANA said its forces had "regained control over Palmyra and surrounding territory after a

series of successful military operations".

IS has suffered a string of setbacks since taking over swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014, and its two main strongholds of Mosul and Raqa both face assaults by forces backed by a US-led coalition.

The jihadists first seized Palmyra in May 2015 and began to systematically destroy and loot the UNESCO world heritage site's monuments and

SYRIA WAR

Russian jets mistakenly bomb US-backed forces: US

Opposition refuses to discuss terrorism at UN talks

temples.

They were driven out in March 2016 but recaptured the city in December when the government was focused on seizing rebel-held east Aleppo.

Before IS first entered the city, Palmyra boasted temples, colonnaded alleys and elaborately decorated tombs that were among the best preserved classical monuments in the Middle East.

But many of the structures have been

destroyed and much of the heritage looted for sale on the black market.

Moscow's support has been key in the Syrian army's Palmyra push, and its warplanes continued to bombard IS positions inside and near the city on Thursday, the Observatory reported.

A decades-old ally of Damascus, Moscow launched an air campaign in September 2015 in support of President Bashar al-Assad's forces.

After losing ground in the early years of the war, Assad's regime has regained significant territory -- including by pushing rebel forces out of second city Aleppo last year -- thanks in large part to Russian support.

- Turkey threatens US allies -

On another battle front against IS, fighters of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced they would cede several villages to the government as part of a deal brokered by Russia to avoid conflict with Turkey.

Turkey launched a cross-border operation in late August that it said aimed to counter both IS and the SDF, which is dominated by Kurdish fighters that Ankara sees as "terrorists".

The surprise announcement by the SDF marks the first time that US-supported fighters has offered to cede territory to Assad's forces.



Le Pen loses EU immunity

AFP, Brussels

The European Parliament yesterday lifted French far-right leader Marine Le Pen's immunity from prosecution over her tweeting of images of Islamic State atrocities.

EU lawmakers voted to deprive National Front leader Le Pen of her immunity in the case, launched by French prosecutors in 2015 over a graphic series of images on Twitter.

They included a photo of the decapitated body of US journalist James Foley.

"I think the result is clear, a big majority is in favour of the lifting of immunity," acting parliament speaker Dimitrios Papadimoulis said.

The lifting of Le Pen's immunity was effective immediately, European Parliament officials told AFP.

But it concerns only the tweets, and not a separate probe into allegations that Le Pen misused public funds when hiring a parliamentary aide, they said.

On Tuesday Le Pen dismissed efforts to lift her immunity as "part of the system that wants to stop the French people's candidate that I am."

Le Pen has so far refused to attend an interview over the tweet investigation with police in the Paris suburb of Nanterre, citing her status as an MEP.

But her senior aide has been placed under formal investigation for "the dissemination of violent images".

Le Pen, who has over 830,000 Twitter followers, addressed the tweets to a French TV journalist whom she accused of likening her party to the jihadist group.

Brexit delayed

Lords back EU nationals' rights

REUTERS, London

Britain's upper parliamentary house dealt a defeat to Theresa May's government on Wednesday, voting for a change to her Brexit plan that says she can only trigger divorce talks if she promises to protect EU citizens' rights.

The defeat is a blow to the Prime Minister, who had hoped to pass her Brexit bill without changes, and it will push back the earliest date she can formally launch the process of Britain's departure from the European Union to around March 13.

However her plan to begin negotiations before the end of March remains on track, and government sources said May would fight to overturn the defeat when the changes are presented to the lower house of parliament, where her party has a majority.

The House of Lords voted 358 to 256 to make an amendment to the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill.

The change requires the government to publish proposals on how to protect EU citizens currently living in Britain -- including their residency rights -- within three months of triggering the Brexit process defined by Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty.

Wednesday's defeat was orchestrated by the opposition Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats.

While May has said she wants to guarantee EU citizens' rights, she has not been prepared to do so until other member states agreed a reciprocal deal.



Members of the Jat community gather in Delhi to demand a greater quota in education and government jobs in Delhi, India, yesterday.

Farc rebels begin disarming

AFP, San José De Oriente

Colombia's FARC rebels began disarming Wednesday under a historic peace deal, beginning the delicate transition from guerrilla army to political party after more than half a century at war.

After weeks of mustering its troops at designated disarmament zones, the FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, was set to begin an inventory of its weapons and destroying munitions under United Nations supervision.

"I'm abandoning my rifle for a broom," said guerrilla Maritza Gonzalez at the FARC's hot, dusty camp in San Jose de Oriente, in northern Colombia.

Three armed guerrillas in combat fatigues guarded the entrance to the rudimentary camp, where a steady stream of trucks delivered bags of cement and workers scrambled to finish building a kitchen, mess hall, bathrooms and a laundry area.

Gonzalez, 54, has been a guerrilla since the age of 14. She said she was hopeful for the future and planned to reunite with her five brothers and four sisters.

"Let's hope this leads to peace," she told AFP.

President Juan Manuel Santos, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in October for his efforts to end the country's 53-year conflict, called the disarmament "historic news for Colombians" in a tweet.

FARC leader Rodrigo "Timochenko" Londoño tweeted that the leftist rebels were laying down their guns "with enthusiasm."

The disarmament of the country's largest guerrilla army will leave rival movement ELN -- currently engaged in rocky peace talks with the government -- as the only rebel group still waging a multi-sided war that has killed 260,000 people.

Jihadist Link German police arrest Syrians, Bosnian

AFP, Berlin

German police yesterday arrested two Syrians and a Bosnian for alleged offences in jihadist groups active in war-torn Syria, including the execution of three dozen civilians.

A 35-year-old Syrian identified as Abdalfatah H. A. is a suspected member of the Al-Nusra Front and accused of 36 counts of war crimes for participating in the mass killing of Syrian government employees in 2013, federal prosecutors said in a statement.

The other Syrian Abdulrahman A. A., aged 26, is allegedly a member of the same jihadist outfit and accused of managing one of its combat unit's funds, vehicles and weapons.

The men were detained by police from the western states of Baden-Wuerttemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia who also searched their apartments.

Separately, the southern state of Bavaria announced the arrest of a 33-year-old Bosnian who is believed to have supplied the Sunni militia Junud al-Sham with several vehicles.

German federal prosecutors have launched around a dozen investigations concerning alleged war crimes committed in Syria or Iraq, alongside dozens of cases of suspected membership of jihadist groups.

The investigations have gained momentum following the arrival of over a million asylum seekers since 2015, including hundreds of thousands of people from Syria and Iraq.

Oldest fossils point to life on Earth four billion years ago

AFP, Paris

The oldest fossils ever found are "direct evidence" of life on Earth 3.8 to 4.3 billion years ago, researchers reported Wednesday in the journal Nature.

Even at the lower end of the spectrum, "the microfossils we discovered are about 300 million years older" than any runners-up, said Dominic Papineau, a professor at University College London who made the discovery.

The fact that life kick-started not long after Earth formed suggests it could also emerge on watery worlds outside our Solar System at comparable stages of formation, the scientists said.

"If life happened so quickly on Earth, then could we expect it to be a simple process that could start on other planets?," asked lead author Matthew Dodd, a gradu-

ate student at the London Centre for Nanotechnology.

The tiny fossils -- half the width of a human hair and up to half-a-millimetre in length -- take the form of blood-red tubes and filaments formed by ocean-dwelling bacteria that fed on iron.



Locked inside white, flower-like quartz structures known to harbour fossils, they were found along what were once warm-water vents on the ocean floor, most often in deep waters.

Such iron-rich, hydrothermal systems exist today, and are home to bacteria that may be similar to those unearthed by Dodd and his colleagues.

Known as the Nuvvuagittuq Supracrustal Belt, the site of the discovery contains some of the oldest sedimentary rocks known on Earth.

BORDER FIRE Israeli army strikes Hamas in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli forces struck Hamas positions in the Gaza Strip yesterday after soldiers were fired at along the border, the Israeli army said.

It is the second time in a week Israel has struck the coastal territory, governed by the Islamist movement Hamas with which Israel has fought three wars since 2008.

"Shots were fired at (Israeli) forces carrying out routine activities on the border with the Gaza Strip," the army said in a statement.

It said aircraft and a tank targeted two Hamas posts in the Strip in response.

A source in the Hamas-run Gaza security services confirmed the strikes hit a lookout post in northern Gaza without causing injuries.

On Monday Israeli aircraft and tanks struck Hamas targets, wounding four, after a rocket fired from Gaza landed in southern Israel.

Rocket fire into Israel is often attributed to smaller hard-line Islamist movements who oppose Hamas.

Israel, however, holds Hamas responsible for all rocket fire as it controls the territory.

On February 16, Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman warned Gaza's Hamas rulers that he would respond harshly to their "provocation" in future.