

MOSUL OFFENSIVE

Forces close in on Mosul mosque

REUTERS, Mosul

Iraqi army helicopters strafed and fired rockets at Islamic State positions in Mosul's Old City yesterday as troops on the ground closed in on the strategic and symbolic prize of the al-Nuri Mosque.

Federal Police troops had advanced past the train station in western Mosul closer to the mosque. A police commander said they were very close to taking control of it.

Residents fled from the area, carrying bags of belongings and picking their way through the wrecked buildings as shells and gunfire echoed behind them. Most of them were women and children.

"Federal Police and Rapid Response forces resumed their advance after halting operations due to bad weather. The troops have a target of retaking the rest of the Old City," a police spokesman said.

The battle to recapture Islamic State's last stronghold in Iraq has now entered its sixth month. Iraqi government forces, backed by US advisers, artillery and air support, have cleared the east and half of western Mosul and are now focused on controlling the Old City.

Recent fighting has targeted the centuries-old al-Nuri Mosque, with its famous leaning minaret. Its capture would be a blow for Islamic State as it was from there that IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate in July 2014 after the hardline militants had seized swathes of Iraq and Syria.

US officials estimate about 2,000 IS fighters remain inside Iraq's second largest city, resisting with mortar fire, snipers and suicide car bombs that plough into army positions.

The black Islamic State flag still flew from the mosque's minaret yesterday.

As fighting has entered into the narrow alleyways and densely populated parts of west Mosul, more residents are fleeing liberated areas where food and water are scarce and homes are often caught in shelling.



Monks and ethnic Rakhine protesters take part in a demonstration against a government push to speed up the citizenship verification process for the stateless Rohingya minority in Sittwe township, Rakhine state, yesterday. The NLD government recently formed a new body led by several cabinet ministers to accelerate the process of issuing national verification cards to Rohingya.

Saffron nation?

Experts say hardline priest's elevation as UP CM a sign Modi is moving towards Hindu India

REUTERS, New Delhi

A saffron-robed Hindu holy man was sworn in yesterday to lead India's most populous state, sealing what appears to be a shift in course by Prime Minister Narendra Modi that could redefine the world's largest democracy as a Hindu nation.

The choice as Uttar Pradesh chief minister of Yogi Adityanath, a firebrand Hindu ascetic with a history of agitation against minority Muslims, stunned observers who said it marked a departure from the platform of development for all on which Modi rose to national power in 2014.

"Modi is saying India is a Hindu country and shall remain so," veteran journalist and commentator Shekhar Gupta told Reuters. "Hindus will rule, so you had better behave."

A spokesman for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) however said the government did not make any distinction between citizens on the basis of religion.

Adityanath, 44, was elected by state lawmakers on Saturday, a week after the BJP won a landslide victory in Uttar Pradesh by mobilising the Hindu vote. The BJP won the biggest majority for any party in the state legislature in 40 years.

He took the oath of office at an open-air ceremony in the state capital Lucknow yesterday, before shaking hands with Modi and other BJP elders who attended.

After the ceremony, Modi said in a tweet: "Our sole mission and motive is development. When UP develops, India develops."

The BJP fielded no candidates from the Muslim minority that makes up 19 percent of the population in a state with a population of 220 million that is home to 15 percent of the world's poor. If it were a country, Uttar Pradesh would be the world's fifth-most populous.

India's 1.3 billion people are about 80 percent Hindu and 14 percent Muslim, with the rest made up of Christians, Sikhs and other minorities. It is officially a secular nation, but the BJP has for years fought elections on a Hindu nationalist agenda, with party members in the past being accused of making anti-Muslim statements to polarise Hindu voters.

"Modi and the BJP had promised the poor of India good times to come," said Paranjy Guha Thakurta, editor of the Economic & Political Weekly.

"When they fail to create jobs, revive the economy or lift investment, they are going to fall back more on the majoritarian agenda."

Adityanath has in the past accused Muslim men of waging "love jihad", or a love war, to entrap Hindu women and convert them to Islam. He drew a reprimand from the election authorities for exhorting Hindus to convert 100 Muslims for every Hindu that adopted Islam.

Yogi Adityanath becomes chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. Hardline priest has history of agitation against Muslims. BJP fields no Muslim candidates; faces charge of majoritarianism.

Rebel assault rocks Damascus

Heavy clashes reported; Israel threatens to 'destroy' Syrian air defence systems

AFP, Beirut

Heavy clashes rocked eastern districts of the Syrian capital yesterday as rebels and jihadists tried to fight their way into the city centre in a surprise assault on government forces.

Also yesterday, Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman threatened to destroy Syria's air defence systems after they fired ground-to-air missiles at Israeli warplanes on Friday.

Syria's military said it shot down one Israeli jet and hit another as they carried out early morning strikes near the famed desert city of Palmyra.

Israel denied any of its planes were hit and said it had been targeting weapons bound for Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, which backs Assad in Syria.

The United Nations has sponsored peace talks to end the conflict since 2012, to no avail.

Government representatives and opposition figures are set to meet for a fourth round of negotiations on March 23 in Switzerland.

The attack comes just days before a fresh round of UN-brokered peace talks in Geneva aiming at ending Syria's six-year war.

Rebels and government forces agreed to a nationwide cessation of hostilities in December, but fighting has continued across much of the

"with two car bombs and several suicide attackers" in the Jobar district, said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group.

Rebels seized several buildings in Jobar and advanced into the nearby Abbasid Square area, seizing part of

Several tanks were seen entering east Damascus as reinforcements ahead of a possible counter-offensive.

Several schools in the capital announced they would stay closed today.

Control of Jobar -- which has been a battleground for more than two years -- is divided between rebels and allied jihadists and government forces.

But with Sunday's attack, Abdel Rahman said, "rebels have shifted from a defensive position in Jobar into an offensive one".

"These are not intermittent clashes -- these are ongoing attempts to advance," he said.

More than 320,000 people have been killed and millions have been displaced since Syria's conflict erupted six years ago with protests against President Bashar al-Assad's rule.

groups had entered the Abbasid district, however, reporting that the army had successfully "blocked an attack by terrorists on military points and residential buildings in Jobar".

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Narendra Modi (L) with Yogi Adityanath (R).



Afghan women walk past a clothing display at a shop in Herat yesterday.

Sturgeon softens stance

Says independence vote timing may be delayed

AFP, London

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon softened her stance on the potential timing of a second independence referendum after Prime Minister Theresa May rejected her call to hold a vote before Britain leaves the European Union.

Sturgeon had called for a referendum to be held between autumn 2018 and spring 2019 but after May said "now is not the time", the Scottish leader said she could be prepared to hold a vote later as long as it was not too long after Brexit.

"It is for (May) then to say what timescale she thinks would be appropriate and then yes I am happy to have that discussion within reason," Sturgeon said during an interview with ITV.

Asked if a vote in 2021 would be reasonable, Sturgeon said it would not because too much time would have lapsed after Britain's EU exit, due in late March 2019, and there could have been too much divergence in areas such as regulations.

"Then gets much harder for Scotland to seek a different course. But if she is talking in the spring of 2019, a bit later perhaps than I was suggesting then there may be some room for discussion around that," she said.

Sturgeon's comments came as a Panelbase poll for the Sunday Times, carried out since her announcement that she would seek a fresh referendum, put support for independence at 44 percent, while 56 percent backed staying in the United Kingdom.

It also found 51 percent of Scots did not want a vote on independence within the next few years.

Ruth Davidson, the leader of May's Conservative Party in Scotland, said any vote could not take place until "after the Brexit process has played out" so that the Scottish people know what choice they face.

"The SNP is not Scotland and they are acting against the majority wishes of the people of Scotland" she told the BBC TV.

Scots rejected independence by 55-45 percent in a referendum in September 2014. But majority of Scots voted in favour of Britain staying in the EU in June.



India hunts hidden cash

AFP, New Delhi

Mansions owned by maids, gardeners and drivers until now have aroused little suspicion in India, where the wealthy have long hidden fortunes in the names of lowly-paid staff to avoid paying tax.

But as the government broadens its crackdown on corruption, a new law promises to end the widespread practise and hundreds of suspicious bank accounts are under investigation.

"There's been an overnight change in the system," real estate lawyer Naresh Gupta told AFP, describing the new rules as "very draconian".

"Investigators can question anyone and ask any government department for information about suspects."

The law banning so-called "benami" transactions, making it illegal for assets to be hidden in another's name, came into effect in November as part a twin strike by the government to flush out undeclared "black money" hoarded by tax evaders.

Holding real estate in someone else's name has been a particularly popular avenue for those seeking to legitimise black money and dodge their tax dues.

France investigates motives of Orly airport attacker

AFP, Paris

French investigators were yesterday trying to establish whether the man shot dead after holding up a soldier at Orly airport in Paris had planned the attack or acted on impulse.

Saturday's assault by 39-year-old Ziyed Ben Belgacem caused a major security scare, leading to the temporary closure of the capital's second-busiest airport and the cancellation of dozens of flights.

By Sunday morning the situation had nearly returned to normal.

Ben Belgacem, who was born in France to Tunisian parents, said he wanted to "die for Allah" and that others too would die after grabbing a female soldier, putting a gun to her head and seizing her rifle.

The attack comes with France still on high alert following a series of jihadist attacks that have claimed more than 230 lives in two years.

Security is one of the key issues in France's two-round presidential election on April 23 and May 7.

'Minute of noise'

Brussels to mark attacks anniversary with sound, not silence

AFP, Brussels

Belgium this week marks the first anniversary of the Brussels airport and metro bombings with ceremonies showing the heart of Europe is still beating despite the country's worst ever attacks.

Applause is set to ring out during a "minute of noise" on Wednesday as trains, trams and buses halt to remember the 32 people killed and more than 320 injured in the attacks claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group.

Belgium remains on high alert with troops patrolling the streets a year after the blasts, carried out by a network that investigators say was also behind the November 2015 Paris attacks.

"Our country is safer now," Interior Minister Jan Jambon told AFP in an interview, while warning that there was still a threat that battle-hardened jihadists fleeing the Islamic State's last stand in Syria could come home to Belgium.

The ceremonies start at Zaventem Airport where King Philippe and Queen Mathilde will lead victims, family members and rescuers in a service of remembrance for the 16 people killed there by suicide bombers Ibrahim El Bakraoui and Najim Laachraoui at 7:58 am on March 22, 2016.

The royal couple will then travel by the subway to Maalbeek metro station in the city's European quarter where Bakraoui's brother Khalid blew himself up on a crowded train at 9:11 am, killing a further 16 people.

In a break from tradition, metro staff will hold a "minute of noise", in which commuters will be invited to take part "to show that they do not forget but they will stand against hate and terror," Stib, the Brussels public transport company, said in a statement.

Finally the king and queen will inaugurate a new curved, steel memorial at the nearby Robert Schuman roundabout, which sits at the heart of the European Union institutions based in Brussels.

