

'Graveyard' for foreign jihadists

AFP, Mosul

The decaying bodies of foreign jihadists are piling up among the ruins of Mosul where the last few dozen Islamic State group fighters are mounting a desperate last stand.

More than three quarters of the remaining jihadists in Mosul are foreigners, according to Iraqi commanders who have reported a spike in suicide attacks as anti-IS forces close in on the Old City.

"They never surrender," said General Abdel Ghani al-Assadi, a commander in Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service.

"Old Mosul will be their graveyard."

It was in Mosul in July 2014 that IS supremo Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made his only public appearance, to urge Muslims worldwide to move to his "caliphate", proclaimed less than a week earlier, straddling Iraq and Syria.

Thousands of foreigners responded to his call.

According to Iraqi police and army commanders, most of the foreign IS fighters still in Mosul in recent months came from Russia, particularly Chechnya, and other former Soviet bloc countries, as well as various Arab states.

Then come Muslims from Asia -- Afghans, Pakistanis, Uighurs from China -- as well as Europeans from France, Germany, Belgium and Britain, along with Americans, the same sources said.

Pale, hungry civilians who managed to escape from the Old City described the foreign fighters as cruel men who detained them in houses, many of which were bombed out.

When Iraqi forces launched an assault on the Old City on June 18, foreigners accounted for only 20 percent of the 1,200 jihadists identified at the time, according to army officers.

But most Iraqi jihadists have fled by mingling in with the flood of civilians fleeing the Old City.

Mosul victory 'imminent'

Soldiers celebrate as Islamic State defensive lines collapse

REUTERS, Mosul/erbil

Iraqi security forces expect to take full control of Mosul within hours as Islamic State's defensive lines crumble in its former de facto capital in Iraq, military commanders said yesterday.

Dozens of soldiers celebrated amid the rubble on the banks of the Tigris river without waiting for a formal victory declaration, some dancing to music blaring out from a truck and firing machineguns into the air, a Reuters correspondent said.

The mood was less festive, however, among some of the nearly one million Mosul residents displaced by months of combat, many of whom are living in camps outside the city with little respite from the blazing summer heat.

"If there is no rebuilding and people don't return to their homes and regain their belongings, what is the meaning of liberation?" Mohammed Haji Ahmed, 43, a clothing trader, told Reuters in the Hassan Sham camp to the east of Mosul.

"We are seeing now the last metres (yards) and then final victory will be announced," a television presenter said, citing the channel's correspondents embedded with security forces fighting in Islamic

State's (IS) redoubt in the Old City of Mosul, by the Tigris. "It's a matter of hours," she said.

However, IS fighters pledged to fight to the death defending their last redoubt in the Old City of Mosul, the group's news agency Amaq said.

"The fighters are collectively pledging martyrdom in Maydan," it

the ultra-hardline group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared from Mosul a "caliphate" over adjoining parts of Iraq and Syria.

A military spokesman cited by the TV said the insurgents' defence lines were collapsing. Iraqi commanders say the militants were fighting for every metre with snip-

blocks," the Iraqi military media office said in a statement. "Some members of Daesh have surrendered," it added, using an Arab acronym of Islamic State.

Artillery explosions and gunfire could still be heard during yesterday afternoon and a column of smoke billowed over the Old City riverside, the Reuters correspondent said.

The road where the soldiers celebrated was scarred with gaping holes from explosions and rubble from a flattened multi-storey shopping mall. Rubbish and ammunition boxes were strewn around and there was no sign of civilians.

Months of urban warfare has displaced 900,000 people, about half the city's pre-war population, and killed thousands, according to aid organisations.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared the end of Islamic State's "state of falsehood" a week ago, after security forces took Mosul's mediaeval Grand al-Nuri mosque - although only after retreating militants blew it up.

Stripped of Mosul, Islamic State's dominion in Iraq will be reduced to mainly rural, desert areas west and south of the city where tens of thousands of people live. The militants are expected to keep up attacks on selected targets across Iraq.



said, referring to the neighbourhood by the Tigris riverside where they are making their last stand.

A US-led international coalition is providing air and ground support to the eight-month campaign to wrest back Mosul, by far the largest city seized by Islamic State in 2014.

Almost exactly three years ago,

ers, grenades and suicide bombers, forcing security forces to fight house-to-house in the densely populated maze of narrow alleyways.

Dozens of insurgents were killed yesterday and others tried to escape by swimming across Tigris, state TV said.

"The battle has reached the phase of chasing the insurgents in remaining



Trump eyes swift UK trade deal

Says state visit to go ahead

AFP, Hamburg

US President Donald Trump yesterday said his controversial state visit to Britain will go ahead, adding that he was hoping for a "very powerful" trade deal with London "very, very quickly".

At a meeting with British Prime Minister Theresa May at the G20 summit in Germany, Trump said they would have "tremendous talks" and reach "a very powerful deal" on trade "very, very quickly."

Any negotiations for such an accord would further drive a wedge between Britain and the European Union which has warned London against striking any separate agreement before its divorce from the bloc was complete.

Back home, May has been derided for seeking to curry favour with Trump and has come under fire for inviting him for a state visit.

But questions about the trip arose after it got no mention in Queen Elizabeth II's annual speech to parliament in June, when it is customary for the monarch to list upcoming state visits.

Asked if the state visit would still go ahead, Trump indicated that they would be working on a date.

"I will be going to London," he added.



(From right, anti-clockwise) US President Donald Trump stands alone ahead of a working session at the G-20 summit; Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sharing a light moment with world leaders including Trump, British Prime Minister Theresa May (bottom R) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (bottom L); and a woman uses her mobile phone as she stands in a looted drugstore in Hamburg where violent anti-capitalist protests took place.

PHOTO: AFP



Partial Syria ceasefire agreed

Arms to fall silent in southeast of the country after Trump-Putin meet

AFP, Hamburg

Russia and the United States have agreed to a ceasefire in southwest Syria starting from midday today, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced Friday.

"Today in Amman Russian, American and Jordanian experts... agreed on a memorandum of understanding to create a de-escalation zone" in the regions of Daraa, Quneitra and Sweida, Lavrov said.

"There will be a ceasefire in this zone from midday Damascus time on July 9."

Lavrov was speaking at the G20 summit in Hamburg where he sat in on talks between US President Donald Trump and Russian leader Vladimir Putin -- their first face-to-face meeting.

The agreement includes areas that have seen Israel retaliate for stray fire into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from recent clashes between Syrian regime forces and rebel fighters.

Russia, an ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, has been engaged in talks this year with Turkey and Iran over

four so-called de-escalation zones in the war-torn country. Negotiations in Astana this week failed to reach an agreement.

Lavrov said the ceasefire would be supervised by Russian military police "in coordination with the Jordanians and Americans".

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson confirmed the agreement. Tillerson said it showed the United States and Russia were able to work together in Syria and that they would continue to do so.

Tillerson said they would also "work together towards a political process that will secure the future of the Syrian people".

The Syrian army had announced on Monday a unilateral ceasefire to halt fighting in Daraa, Quneitra and Sweida.

These areas form one of the four de-escalation zones agreed under peace talks in Kazakhstan brokered by rebel backed Turkey and regime allies Russia and Iran. The Syrian army's unilateral ceasefire was to have expired at midnight on Thursday.



US to test THAAD amid North Korea tensions

Bombers drill near Korea DMZ in show of force

AFP, Washington

The US Military Defense Agency said Friday it would soon test an anti-ballistic missile system, days after North Korea demonstrated its arsenal was capable of striking parts of Alaska.

The announcement came as US bombers carried out a rare live fire drill in South Korea yesterday, flying close to the DMZ in a show of force, the South's defence ministry said.

The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to be tested is designed to intercept and destroy short-, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles during their final phase of flight.

The MDA said the test against a ballistic missile target would be conducted at the Pacific Spaceport Complex Alaska in Kodiak, Alaska.

The US military this year began deploying THAAD to South Korea, a move that infuriated China, which has argued the deployment would further destabilize the situation on the Korean peninsula.

Meanwhile, South Korea's Yonhap news agency said long-range heavy bombers flew close to the tense and heavily militarised land border with the North before turning back.

The exercise by two B-1B Lancers, flown from Andersen Air Base in Guam, was part of a 10-hour mission with South Korean and Japanese fighter jets in response to a "series of increasingly escalatory actions by North Korea including the intercontinental ballistic missile" on Tuesday, US Pacific Air Forces said.

Four US and South Korean jet fighters joined the live fire drill, which was conducted at a range in Yeongwol County, some 80 kilometres (50 miles) south of the inter-Korean border, the South's air force said.

The long-range heavy aircraft each dropped a 2,000-pound (900-kilogram) laser-guided bunker-busting smart bomb, Yonhap said.

The US statement said the B-1Bs released "inert" weapons at the Pilsung Range.



Kashmiri protestors throw stones towards Indian government forces during clashes in Srinagar yesterday. India yesterday imposed a widespread curfew, cut off all internet services and deployed thousands of troops in Kashmir as the volatile Himalayan region marked the anniversary of a hugely popular rebel leader's death.

PHOTO: AFP



Malala finishes School, joins Twitter

AFP, London

In 2012, a Taliban gunman shot her in the head for advocating education for girls in her native Pakistan. On Friday, Nobel Peace laureate Malala Yousafzai completed her schooling in Britain, calling the achievement "bittersweet".

"Today is my last day of school and my first day on @Twitter," she wrote on her newly opened account, which gained more than 134,000 followers in three hours.

Yousafzai, who will be turning 20 this month, had been attending a school in the city of Birmingham where she was treated after the shooting in October 2012.

After blogging and campaigning for girls' education in her native Swat valley, she was shot as she rode back to her village on a bus after taking an exam.

Yousafzai has since become a global icon for girls' education, winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

"Graduating from secondary school (high school) is bittersweet for me," she tweeted, adding: "I know that millions of girls around the world are out of school and may never get the opportunity to complete their education".

But she said she was "excited" about her future and promised to continue "fighting for girls".