

Iraq launches assault on IS-held Mosul



Tanks and armoured vehicles of the Iraqi forces, advance towards the south of Mosul

Al-Buseif

Irqi forces seized 10 villages from the Islamic State group yesterday, launching a daunting operation to retake west Mosul which aid groups warned will put civilians in grave danger.

Advancing from several directions, the forces moved towards Mosul airport, which lies just south of the city, marking a new phase in Iraq's largest military operation in years.

The Islamic State group has put up stiff resistance to defend Mosul, the city where its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed a "caliphate" straddling Iraq and Syria in 2014.

"Our forces are beginning the liberation of the citizens from the terror of IS," Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said in a short televised speech.

A top army commander then announced that forces led by federal police units retook villages south of Mosul, including Athbah, which leaves them within striking distance of the airport.

The sky south of Mosul was black with smoke from air strikes and artillery as thousands of forces in armoured convoys worked converged on the airport.

"They're desperate," Ali, a Rapid Response officer, said in the village of Al-Buseif as helicopters flew overhead,

tracking the last IS fighters attempting to flee.

"They will try to cause as many losses as possible, because they know they will die anyway," his colleague Alaa said.

The jihadists overran Mosul and swathes of other territory north and west of Baghdad in 2014, routing security forces ill-prepared to face the assault.

The Iraqi government launched the offensive to reconquer Mosul on October 17, throwing tens of thousands of forces into the long-awaited counter-attack with air and ground support from a US-led coalition fighting IS in Iraq and Syria. *-(AFP)*

Forces battling IS in Mosul

Counter-Terrorism Service

The CTS is an elite Iraqi special forces unit that has spearheaded assaults in most key battles against IS. It did most of the fighting in east Mosul and is expected to enter west Mosul in the coming days.

Kurdish forces

The peshmerga are the armed forces of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region. They nominally answer to the federal government but in practice operate independently, battling IS along a long front in the country's north.

US-led coalition

A US-led international alliance is carrying out air strikes against Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, and providing training, arms and equipment to forces opposing the jihadists.

Army

The army has begun playing an enhanced role in operations against the jihadists since it was revitalised by US-led training after several of its divisions collapsed during the IS offensive two years ago.

Turkish troops

Deployed at a base near Mosul from which they have carried out artillery strikes against IS. Turkish troops are also present inside Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region.

Civilians confused over 'stay at home'

Arbil

The first four months of the Iraqi offensive on Mosul were marked by relatively low displacement but the civilians who remain in the city's west face more dangers than ever.

In the east, the Iraqi forces adopted a strategy of protecting civilians by keeping them at home.

Since the offensive against the Islamic State group was launched in October, around 200,000 civilians are estimated to have fled their homes, according to the United Nations.

"We know that IS targets people who try to flee, causing many casualties," Abdulwahab al-Saadi, said a top commander of the elite Counter-Terrorism Service.

"Of course it would be easier for us to bomb the jihadists with heavy weapons if the city was emptied of its inhabitants, but as our main goal is to preserve the lives of civilians, we are convinced they will be better protected if they stay at home," he said.

But 19-year-old Taha Ahmed thinks those who can should leave the city, as he did with his family after two months of brutal fighting.

"We escaped at 2:00 am. There were a lot of families with us. IS was shooting at us but we kept running," he said.

"I would tell the people (on the western side) if there is heavy shelling they should hide at home in a safe place. And if they have a chance to get out, it's better to flee."

'350,000 children trapped in west Mosul'



Displaced Iraqi children sit at a camp where Iraqi families are taking shelter as Iraqi forces continue their military operation to recapture Mosul from Islamic State

London

Around 350,000 children are trapped in western Mosul, Save the Children warned yesterday as Iraqi forces launched a fresh offensive on jihadists defending the strategic city.

"Iraqi forces and their allies, including the US and UK, must do everything in their power to protect children and their families from harm, and avoid civilian buildings like schools and hospitals as they push deeper into the city," said the London-based charity's Iraq country director, Maurizio Crivallero.

He warned that escape is not an option for most families, who risk summary execution by fighters from the Islamic State group, sniper fire and landmines --

but they are also running out of food, water and medicine.

"This is the grim choice for children in western Mosul right now: bombs, crossfire and hunger if they stay -- or execution and snipers if they try to run," Crivallero said in a statement.

He added: "Safe escape routes for civilians must also be established as soon as possible."

Save the Children warned that "the impact of artillery and other explosive weaponry in those narrow, densely-populated streets is likely to be more deadly and indiscriminate than anything we have seen in the conflict so far".

The 350,000 figure relates to people under the age of 18, a charity spokeswoman confirmed