

Contested Iraqi City Of Ramadi Falls To IS

BY SAMEER N. YACOB

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — The contested city of Ramadi fell to the Islamic State group on Sunday, as Iraqi forces abandoned their weapons and armored vehicles to flee the provincial capital in a major loss despite intensified U.S.-led airstrikes.

Bodies, some burned, littered the streets as local officials reported the militants carried out mass killings of Iraqi security forces and civilians. Online video showed Humvees, trucks and other equipment speeding out of Ramadi, with soldiers gripping onto their sides.

"Ramadi has fallen," said Muhammad Haimour, a spokesman for the governor of Anbar province. "The city was completely taken. ... The military is fleeing."

With defeat looming, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered security forces not to abandon their posts across Anbar province, apparently fearing the extremists could capture the entire desert region that saw intense fighting after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion to topple dictator Saddam Hussein.

Sunday's retreat recalled the collapse of Iraqi security forces last summer in the face of the Islamic State group's blitz into Iraq that saw it capture a third of the country, where it has declared a caliphate, or Islamic State. It also calls into question the Obama administration's hopes of relying solely on airstrikes to support the Iraqi forces in expelling the extremists.

Earlier Sunday, al-Abadi ordered Shiite militias to prepare to go into the Sunni-dominated province, ignoring U.S. concerns their presence could spark sectarian bloodshed. By late Sunday, a large number of Shiite militiamen had arrived at a military base near Ramadi, apparently to participate in a possible counter-offensive, said the head of the Anbar provincial council, Sabah Karhout.

"We welcome any group, including Shiite militias, to come and help us in liberating the city from the militants. What happened today is a big loss caused by lack of good planning by the military," a Sunni tribal leader, Naem al-Gaoud, told the Associated Press.

He said many tribal fighters died trying to defend the city, and bodies, some charred, were strewn in the streets, while others had been thrown in the Euphrates River. Ramadi mayor Dalaf al-Kubaisi said that more than 250 civilians and security forces were killed over the past two days, includ-



STRINGER/MCCLATCHY DC/TNS

An Islamic State car bomb explodes at the gate of a government building near the provincial governor's compound in Ramadi, Iraq, Saturday during heavy fighting that saw most of the city fall to the militants.

ing dozens of police and other government supporters shot dead in the streets or their homes, along with their wives, children and other family members.

The U.S.-led coalition said Sunday it conducted seven airstrikes in Ramadi in the last 24 hours. "It is a fluid and contested battlefield," said Army Col. Steve Warren, a Pentagon spokesman. "We are supporting (the Iraqis) with air power."

The final push by the extremists began early Sunday with four nearly simultaneous bombings that targeted police officers defending the Malaab district in southern Ramadi, a pocket of the city still under Iraqi government control, killing at least 10 police and wounding 15, authorities said. Among the dead was Col. Muthana al-Jabri, the chief of the Malaab police station, they said.

Later, three suicide bombers drove their explosive-laden cars into the gate of the Anbar Operation Command, the military headquarters for the province, killing at least five soldiers and wounding 12, authorities said.

Fierce clashes erupted between security forces and Islamic State militants following the attacks, and the extremists later seized Malaab after government forces withdrew, with the militants saying they controlled the military headquarters.

A police officer who was stationed at the headquarters said retreating Iraqi forces left behind about 30 army vehicles and weapons that included artillery and assault rifles. He said some two dozen police officers went missing during the fighting.

The officer and other officials spoke on condition of anonymity as they weren't authorized to talk to journalists.

On a militant website frequented by Islamic State members, a message from the group claimed its fighters held the 8th Brigade army base, as well as tanks and missile launchers left behind by fleeing soldiers. The message could not be independently verified by the AP, but it was similar to others released by the group and was spread online by known supporters of the extremists.

Last week, the militants swept through Ramadi, seizing the main government headquarters and other key parts of the city. It marked a major setback for the Iraqi government's efforts to drive the militants out of areas they seized last year. Previous estimates suggested the Islamic State group held at least 65 percent of the vast Anbar province.

On Friday, with Ramadi on the brink of collapse, the U.S. military command downplayed IS gains there, describing them as fleeting.

"We've seen similar attacks

in Ramadi over the last several months which the (Iraqi security forces) have been able to repel," said Marine Brig. Gen. Thomas D. Weidley, chief of staff for the campaign fighting the militants, adding that the U.S. was confident the Iraqi government will be able to take back the terrain it lost in Ramadi.

Backed by U.S.-led airstrikes, Iraqi forces and Kurdish fighters have made gains against the Islamic State group, including capturing the northern city of Tikrit. But progress has been slow in Anbar, a Sunni province where anger at the Shiite-led government runs deep and where U.S. forces struggled for years to beat back a potent insurgency. American soldiers fought some of their bloodiest battles since Vietnam on the streets of Ramadi and Fallujah.

U.S. troops were able to improve security in the province starting in 2006 when powerful tribes and former militants turned against al-Qaida in Iraq, a precursor to the Islamic State group, and allied with the Americans.

But the so-called Sunni Awakening movement waned in the years after U.S. troops withdrew at the end of 2011, with the fighters complaining of neglect and distrust from the Shiite-led government in Baghdad.

Malaysia Begins Talks On Migrant Crisis

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysia launched high-level talks with its neighbors Sunday to try to solve the deepening problem of refugees stranded in boats off Southeast Asia's shores, but there appeared to be no quick solution to the crisis.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman met with his counterpart from Bangladesh, Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, ahead of a meeting with the Indonesian and Thai foreign ministers scheduled for Wednesday, officials said.

But more than two weeks into a regional humanitarian crisis, the stance of Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia remained unchanged — that none wants to take the migrants in, fearing that accepting a few would result in an unstoppable flow.

Myanmar, from where many of the migrants have fled, appears unwilling to engage in talks.

"I have already stated that we cannot afford to accept more of them, as a huge number already exist here — and so far no countries want to settle them," Anifah was quoted as saying after Sunday's talks by the online edition of Malaysia's government-linked mass daily New Straits Times.

Amtrak: NE Corridor Trains To Resume

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Amtrak's Northeast Corridor trains will resume service Monday in "complete compliance" with federal safety orders following last week's deadly derailment, officials announced Sunday.

Company president Joseph Boardman said Amtrak staff and crew have been working "around the clock" to restore service along the route between Washington and Boston following Tuesday night's crash that killed eight people and injured more than 200 others.

"Our infrastructure repairs have been made with the utmost care and emphasis on infrastructure integrity including complete compliance with Federal Railroad Administration directives," Boardman said in a statement Sunday.

Federal regulators on Saturday ordered Amtrak to expand use of a speed-control system long in effect for southbound trains near the crash site to northbound trains in the same area. The agency also ordered the company to examine all curves along the Northeast Corridor and determine if more can be done to improve safety, and to increase speed limit signs along the route.

Service along the corridor will resume with departures from New York City at 5:30 a.m. Monday and Philadelphia at 5:53 a.m. Monday, and all Acela Express, Northeast Regional and other services will resume for the first time since the accident, the company said.

WH Hopefuls: Iraq War Was A Mistake

WASHINGTON (AP) — A dozen years later, American politics has reached a rough consensus about the Iraq War: It was a mistake.

Politicians hoping to be president rarely run ahead of public opinion. So it's a revealing moment when the major contenders for president in both parties find it best to say that 4,491 Americans and countless Iraqis lost their lives in a war that shouldn't have been waged.

Many people have been saying that for years, of course. Polls show most of the public have judged the war a failure by now. Over time, more and more GOP politicians have allowed that the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq undermined Republican President George W. Bush's rationale for the 2003 invasion.

It hasn't been an easy evolution for those such as Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton, who voted for the war in 2002 while serving in Congress. That vote, and her refusal to fully disavow it, cost her during her 2008 primary loss to Barack Obama, who wasn't in the Senate in 2002 but had opposed the war.

In her memoir last year, Clinton wrote that she had voted based on the information available at the time, but "I got it wrong. Plain and simple."

Pope Canonizes 2 Nuns From Palestine

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis canonized two nuns from what was 19th-century Palestine on Sunday in hope of encouraging Christians across the Middle East who are facing a wave of persecution from Islamic extremists.

Sisters Mariam Bawardy and Marie Alphonsine Ghattas were among four nuns who were made saints Sunday at a Mass in a sun-soaked St. Peter's Square. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and an estimated 2,000 pilgrims from the region, some waving Palestinian flags, were on hand for the canonization of the first saints from the Holy Land since the early years of Christianity.

Church officials are holding up Bawardy and Ghattas as a sign of hope and encouragement for Christians across the Mideast at a time when violent persecution and discrimination have driven many Christians from the region of Christ's birth.

They were canonized alongside two other nuns, Saints Jeanne Emilie de Villeneuve from France and Maria Cristina of the Immaculate Conception from Italy.

"Inspired by their example of mercy, charity and reconciliation, may the Christians of these lands look with hope to the future, following the path of solidarity and fraternal coexist

'Pitch Perfect 2' Tops Busy Box Office

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The ladies of "Pitch Perfect 2" hit all the right notes opening weekend, amassing a huge \$70.3 million debut, according to Rentrak estimates Sunday.

The Elizabeth Banks-directed sequel to the 2012 sleeper hit and video on demand phenomenon cost Universal Pictures only \$29 million to produce. The first film, however, grossed only \$65 million domestically across its entire run.

George Miller's critically acclaimed "Mad Max: Fury Road" claimed a distant second place in its debut weekend with a solid and expected \$44.4 million. The R-rated, high-octane film cost a reported \$150 million to make and stars Charlize Theron and Tom Hardy.

Holdovers "Avengers: Age of Ultron," "Hot Pursuit," and "Furious 7" claimed the rest of the spots in the top five.

Texas Biker-Gang Shootout Leaves 9 Dead

BY NOMAAN MERCHANT

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — A shootout among rival motorcycle gangs at a popular Central Texas restaurant left nine bikers dead and 18 injured, and it sent panicked patrons and bystanders fleeing for safety, a police spokesman said Sunday.

The violence erupted shortly after noon at a busy Waco shopping center along Interstate 35 that draws a large lunchtime crowd. Waco police Sgt. W. Patrick Swanton said eight people died at the scene of the shooting at Twin Peaks restaurant and another person died at a hospital.

The nine killed were all members of biker gangs, he said, as were the 18 people who were taken to hospitals with injuries that include stab and gunshot wounds. Some victims are being treated for both, he said.

"This is probably one of the most gruesome crime scenes I've ever seen in my 34 years of law enforcement," Swanton said, later adding, "I was amazed that we didn't have innocent civilians killed or injured."

Dozens of motorcycles were parked in a nearby lot Sunday. Bodies were found in the parking lot of Twin Peaks and in another adjacent lot for a family restaurant.

"Dozens" of suspected gang members have been detained, Swanton said.

Swanton said at least five rival gangs gathered at Twin Peaks for a meeting that he said focused on turf and recruitment, two areas where the groups have often clashed. Preliminary findings indicate a dispute broke out in a bathroom and then spilled into the restaurant where it escalated to include knives and firearms, he said. There were 150 to

200 gang members inside the restaurant at the time.

Police were aware of the meeting in advance, and at least 12 Waco officers in addition to state troopers were outside the restaurant, part of a national chain that features scantily clad waitresses, when the fight began.

"We've been made aware in the past few months of rival biker gangs ... being here and causing issues," Swanton said.

Officers shot armed bikers, Swanton said, adding that the actions of law enforcement prevented further deaths.

It was not known if any of the nine dead were killed by police officers.

Swanton said that the restaurant's operators also were aware of the meeting in advance, and he described the management as uncooperative with authorities in addressing concerns.

"Apparently the management (of Twin Peaks) wanted them here and so we didn't have any say-so on whether they could be here or not," Swanton said.

A statement sent Sunday night on behalf of Jay Patel,

operating partner for the Waco franchise, said, "Our management team has had ongoing and positive communications with the police," and added that the restaurant was cooperating with the investigation.

But Rick Van Warner, a spokesman for the Dallas-based corporate franchisor, said the company is reviewing the circumstances surrounding the shooting and is "seriously considering revoking" the Waco location's franchise agreement.

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