

Fighting rages in Iraqi provincial capital

By Patrick Martin
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Thousands of Iraqi civilians have fled heavy fighting in Ramadi, capital of Anbar Province, according to reports Friday from government officials in Baghdad. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured three towns on the outskirts of Ramadi Wednesday and pushed forward toward the city's downtown section.

The Iraqi military rushed hundreds of troops from an elite Interior Ministry commando unit to Ramadi Thursday, amid reports that military units in the center of the city were surrounded by the Sunni fundamentalist fighters. McClatchy News Service reported, "Residents on Wednesday had described a near-total collapse of Ramadi's defenses, with huge numbers of security forces abandoning large portions of the city in the face of the Islamic State assault."

McClatchy said that tens of thousands of civilians were trapped in the city and new, unaligned militias had sprung up to replace the fleeing police and military units and defend their neighborhoods. Local hospitals were crowded with civilian casualties.

Other reports described Ramadi as a ghost town, with streets empty. Anbar's deputy governor, Faleh al-Issawi, called the situation "catastrophic" and issued a plea for help. He told the Associated Press in a telephone interview, "We urge the Baghdad government to supply us immediately with troops and weapons in order to help us prevent the city from falling into the hands of the IS group."

Ramadi has been contested territory between ISIS and the Baghdad government for more than a year, but the recent fighting has completely severed road links from Ramadi to the east. Most of the 70-mile stretch from Ramadi to Baghdad is under ISIS control, including the second-largest city in the province, Fallujah. Some desert territory to the west of the city remains under government control, including the huge former US airbase at Al-Asad, where 300 US military trainers are stationed.

The fighting in eastern Anbar Province intensified last week with an abortive offensive by pro-government forces, including regular army units and Sunni tribal

fighters. The government of Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi held back the Shiite militias that played a critical role in the successful reconquest of the city of Tikrit last month, ordering them not to enter Anbar Province, whose population is nearly all Sunni.

In a statement apparently aimed at preparing US public opinion for the fall of Ramadi, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Wednesday that the city was "not symbolic in any way... or central to the future of Iraq." He added, "It's not been declared part of the caliphate" by ISIS. "It won't be the end of the campaign if it falls."

Dempsey's remarks provoked a furious rejoinder from Senator John McCain, chairman of the Armed Services Committee and a leading advocate of renewing the US ground war in Iraq. "Disregarding the strategic importance of Ramadi is a denial of reality and an insult to the families of hundreds of brave young Americans who were killed and wounded during the surge fighting to free Ramadi from the grip of Al Qaeda," he said in a written statement.

McCain claimed that the "current US strategy is to defend an oil refinery in Baiji, but abandon the capital of pivotal Anbar province." He was referring to Iraq's largest oil refinery, located in Salahuddin province north of Tikrit and south of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, now under ISIS control.

ISIS fighters began a major attack on the refinery Thursday, demonstrating the group's continuing ability to wage multiple offensive operations in both Iraq and Syria. Even at the height of the ISIS offensive last summer, Iraqi Army units had been able to hold the refinery against a siege by the Islamic fundamentalists. The facility produces 40 percent of Iraq's gasoline and its loss would be crippling for the Abadi government.

General Dempsey said US warplanes were conducting heavy air strikes against ISIS forces near Baiji. "The refinery is at no risk right now, and we're focusing a lot of air support," he said. Iraqi military spokesmen said Friday that the military had successfully counterattacked

and seized control of the towns of al-Malha and al-Mazraah, south of Baiji. Shiite militiamen participated in the fighting.

The fighting in Ramadi and Baiji largely overshadowed Abadi's first visit to Washington as prime minister. In the course of the three-day trip, he met with President Obama at the White House, as well as with Republican congressional leaders, State Department and Pentagon officials, and representatives from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. He also gave a speech to a Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Abadi came away with comparatively little. Obama offered \$200 million in humanitarian aid for civilians in Tikrit and other territory recaptured by pro-government forces, but no additional military hardware. Pentagon officials have resisted supplying more heavy weapons to Iraq for fear they will be captured by ISIS or made available to pro-Iranian militias. But Obama did agree that 36 F-16 fighter jets, promised to Iraq in 2011, would finally be delivered.

On the economic front, Abadi was seeking loans to cover the \$22 billion hole in Iraq's budget caused by the sharp fall in the world price of crude oil, Iraq's principal export and source of nearly all government revenue. The Iraqi government plans to draw on \$2.4 billion from the IMF and \$2 billion in loans from the World Bank, as well as obtaining loan guarantees from the Export-Import Bank of the United States to finance purchase of Boeing jets for Iraqi Airways.

In the course of his visit, Abadi reiterated the strategic choice made by his government, over the objections of some US military commanders, to follow up last month's retaking of Tikrit by moving south and west, into Anbar Province, rather than northwest along the Tigris River toward Mosul. The Abadi government is concerned about the proximity of ISIS forces to the capital city—Fallujah is only 40 miles west of Baghdad—and wants to push them back before undertaking operations around Mosul.

"I'm working on a timetable, which I'm not going to reveal," he told reporters in Washington, adding that a counteroffensive towards Mosul would not come before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which extends from mid-June to mid-July.

On Friday, Iraqi officials said that government forces had killed Saddam Hussein's former vice president, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, the highest-ranking official of the Baathist regime who remained active in fighting the US puppet regime. The governor of Salahuddin province,

Raed al-Jabouri, said soldiers and Shiite militiamen killed Douri early Friday east of Tikrit.

Meanwhile, House Republican leaders said that there was little prospect of action on an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) for the war against ISIS. Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy said Monday that there was no prospect of passing the AUMF in the House because the draft resolution submitted by the White House was too restrictive. Passage of the White House draft "would weaken our ability to respond to our current situation," he said, citing the expansion of the conflict in the Middle East to Yemen.

House Speaker John Boehner called Tuesday for a wider operational role for US troops in fighting ISIS forces, declaring that Obama had placed "artificial constraints" on US military commanders in the region. Speaking of the AUMF resolution, Boehner said, "I have not given up on it, but until the president gets serious about fighting the fight and really has a strategy that makes some sense, there is no reason for us to give him less authority than he has today."

The White House presently claims authority for waging war in both Iraq and Syria under resolutions passed more than a dozen years ago. The first resolution, passed in October 2001 after the 9/11 attacks, authorized the war against Al Qaeda and the US invasion of Afghanistan. ISIS publicly broke with Al Qaeda two years ago. The second resolution, passed in October 2002, authorized the US war against the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein. Obama aides now argue that this resolution can authorize a US war to support the Iraqi government of Abadi.

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