

Iraqi troops seize main bridge, advance on mosque in Mosul

Iraqi government forces battling Daesh terrorists for Mosul took control of a main bridge over the Tigris river on Wednesday and advanced towards the mosque where the group's leader declared a caliphate in 2014, federal police said.

The seizure of the Iron Bridge, linking eastern Mosul with the terrorist-held Old City on the west side, means the government holds three of the five bridges over the Tigris and bolsters Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's assertion that the battle is reaching its final stages, Reuters reported.

The bridge, which was damaged in fighting late last year, was captured by federal police and Interior Ministry Rapid Response units, a police statement said.

The gains were made in heavy fighting in which troops fought street-by-street against an enemy using suicide car bombs, mortar and sniper fire, and grenade-dropping drones to defend what was once their main stronghold.

"Our troops are making a steady advance ... and we are now less than 800 meters from the mosque," a federal police spokesman said.

Losing the city would be a huge blow to Daesh as it has served as the terrorist group's de facto capital since its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself head of a caliphate spanning Iraq and Syria from the Nuri Mosque in July 2014.

The capture of the mosque would thus be a huge symbolic victory as well as a concrete gain. But many hard days of fighting could still lie ahead as government forces try to make headway in the streets and narrow alleyways of the Old City.

Daesh terrorists have booby-trapped houses, and government forces will also be fighting amongst civilians, ruling out



REUTERS

the extensive use of air and artillery support.

Heavy fighting was also reported on Wednesday around the Mosul museum by journalists and combatants. A Daesh suicide car bomb exploded near the museum. Helicopters strafed the ground with machinegun fire and missiles.

The intense combat marked a decisive stage in the battle for Mosul which started on Oct. 17 last year, and in the wider struggle against Daesh.

As well as waging terror in Iraq and Syria, the terrorists have inspired attacks in cities in Europe, Africa and elsewhere that have killed hundreds of civilians.

In Baghdad, Abadi said: "Daesh become day after day surrounded inside a tight area and they are in their final days."

In a news conference on Tuesday night, he warned the terrorists that they must surrender or face death.

Residents have streamed out of western neighborhoods recaptured by the government, many desperately hungry and traumatized by living under the terrorist group's harsh rule.

As many as 600,000 civilians are still trapped with the terrorists inside Mosul. The Ministry of Immigration and Displacement said on Tuesday that in recent days almost 13,000 displaced people from western Mosul had been given assistance and temporary accommodation each day, adding to the 200,000 already displaced.

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No famine declared in Yemen, but 60 percent on the brink

A UN-backed report on Yemen published on Wednesday found there was no famine in the country but said 60 percent of Yemenis, or 17 million people, are in "crisis" or "emergency" food situations, an increase of 20 percent since last June.

The report was written by an expert team using the globally recognized IPC methodology. The IPC, or Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, is a system of analyzing food security on a five-point scale, where five is "famine," Reuters reported.

Saudi Arabia has been incessantly pounding Yemen since March 2015 in a bid to reinstall the country's ex-government and crush the Houthi Ansarullah movement.

A naval embargo imposed by the Saudis, fighting around the ex-government-controlled port of Aden and airstrikes on the port of Yemen's Hudaydah have severely reduced imports since 2015.

A lack of fuel, coupled with



WFP

insecurity and damage to markets and roads, has also prevented supplies from being distributed.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in February said some 18.8 million people, or more than two-thirds of Yemen's population, need assistance. Some 10 million of those are "acutely affected" and need assistance for food, water, health care and

protection.

The UN agency is seeking \$2.1 billion this year to help people in Yemen.

OCHA last month estimated that some 10,000 civilians have died in the conflict. However, according to the latest tally by a Yemeni monitoring group, the military aggression has claimed the lives of over 11,400 Yemenis, including women and children.

Le Pen says May 'good at getting it wrong'

French far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen criticized British Prime Minister Theresa May for hosting her main rival, centrist Emmanuel Macron, while apparently snubbing her.

Macron visited May at her Downing Street office in London on Feb. 21. He was photographed arriving and leaving, and spoke to reporters and TV crews in front of the building, Reuters reported.

Asked in an interview whether she thought this was overt support for Macron and a snub towards her, Le Pen said: "It seems to be the case."

The British government says it has a long-standing policy not to engage with Le Pen's Front National party which has been considered toxic for decades by many mainstream European parties.

According to a transcript of the LBC interview, which was conducted by anti-EU British politician Nigel Farage, Le Pen said the decision to host Macron was inconsistent with May's own stance on delivering Brexit and reducing immigration to Britain.

Le Pen said Macron, who is strongly pro-EU, represented "the opposite of what Brexit stands for and the choice made by the British people."

Asked whether she had requested a meeting with May, Le Pen said she had not but would have to meet May if she was elected.

Polls suggest Macron and Le Pen are likely to face each other in the run-off of the French presidential election on May 7, with Macron likely to win by a wide margin.

Farage suggested to Le Pen that May's attitude towards her would change if she won the French election, drawing a parallel with Britain's dealings with US President Donald Trump. He said Downing Street had not wanted to engage with Trump until after he was elected.

Le Pen responded: "She is good at getting it wrong but this is rather reassuring."

Clashes erupt in Bahrain as demos held in solidarity with Sheikh Qassim

Scores of people held separate protests in Bahrain to voice their support for distinguished cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim, who has been stripped of his nationality and put on trial by the government in Manama.

Protesters took to the streets in the village of Ma'ameer, situated about 15 kilometers south of the capital, Manama, on Tuesday evening, and chanted slogans against King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Press TV reported.

The demonstrators hurled stones and fireworks at government forces,

who responded with tear gas and stun grenades.

On Sitra Island, located five kilometers south of the capital, marchers held up pictures of Sheikh Qassim, who is the spiritual leader of Bahrain's dissolved opposition bloc - the Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society.

They also carried banners calling for the downfall of King Hamad, and condemned Saudis for providing military support to Manama in its heavy-handed crackdown on opposition activists.

Earlier in the day, Bahrain's South

High Criminal Court adjourned the trial of the 77-year-old Sheikh Qassim until May 7.

Bahraini authorities stripped the cleric of his citizenship on June 20, 2016. They later dissolved the Islamic Enlightenment Institution, founded by him, in addition to the opposition Al-Risala Islamic Association.

Manama has pressed charges of "illegal fund collections, money laundering and helping terrorism" against Sheikh Qassim, who has strongly denied them.



Press TV

Brexit 'threats'

The European Union will not bow to British "threats" that it is prepared to walk away from Brexit talks without a deal, the bloc's president, Donald Tusk, said Wednesday.

Top EU officials condemn Turkish 'fascism' remarks

The European Union's top officials sharply criticized Turkey on Wednesday for accusing EU states Germany and the Netherlands of fascism, saying the charges were driving Ankara further away from its goal of joining the bloc.

A war of words between Turkey and the EU has erupted this month over planned rallies by Turkish politicians in Rotterdam and other European cities that aimed to drum up support for plans to give Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sweeping new powers in a referendum on April 16, Reuters reported.

Erdogan retaliated by branding the Netherlands "Nazi remnants". He has also accused Germany of "fascist actions" for cancelling several planned rallies.



AFP

"Rotterdam... totally destroyed by the Nazis, which now has a mayor born in Morocco. If any anyone sees fascism in Rotterdam they are completely detached from reality," European Council President Donald Tusk told the European Parliament.

Tusk's remarks were echoed by the head of the executive European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, who told the parliament he was "scandalized" by the Turkish accusations.

"This is totally unacceptable and the one who is doing this is taking distance from Europe and not trying to enter the European Union," he said.

Erdogan, who survived a military coup last summer, has defended his plans to amass greater powers, saying Turkey needs greater stability. But his crackdown on dissenting voices among the judiciary and the media since the failed coup has drawn strong criticism in the West.

Still, the EU is caught between holding Erdogan accountable and guaranteeing the continuation of a deal to control the flow of refugees and migrants who pass through Turkey to Europe.

This deal has given the EU a badly-needed breathing space after more than a million people, mostly fleeing conflicts in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, fled to the bloc in 2015-16 via Turkey, Greece and the Balkans.

Turkey's EU Affairs Minister Omer Celik told Reuters on Tuesday it was time for Ankara to reassess that deal as the EU had failed to deliver on its promise to provide visa-free access to Europe in exchange for help on migration.

On Wednesday the European Commission said it remained committed to the deal and expected Turkey to comply as well as it was in their mutual interest.

The EU has previously said Turkey must still meet seven of 72 criteria required for visa-free travel, including a softening of its anti-terrorism laws that Brussels said says are applied too broadly but which Ankara insists are necessary.

Italy government wins Senate confidence vote on justice reform

The Italian government won a confidence vote in the Senate on Wednesday on a fiercely contested reform of the justice system aimed at preventing thousands of cases being wiped out by the statute of limitations before a verdict is reached.

The bill has made slow progress through parliament since it was presented by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi more than two years ago and it will now have to return to the lower house for another reading before it can become law, Reuters reported.

It was approved in the Senate by 156 votes to 121 in a confidence motion which would have forced Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni to resign if he had lost.

The reform toughens sanctions for theft and burglary and limits publication of wiretaps in criminal investigations, but the most contentious aspect involves the statute of limitations, which imposes deadlines on courts to complete legal proceedings.

Partly due to the notorious slowness of Italy's justice system, prosecutors say it is all but impossible to reach a definitive verdict for most financial crimes within the prescribed time frame, which is seldom more than eight years.

Uniquely among advanced countries, Italy's statute of limitations starts from the moment an alleged crime is committed rather than from the point it is discovered, and the time limit is not extended when a defendant is indicted or sentenced. No other country has both rules.

This is a major reason why, according to data issued by the Council of Europe, just one percent of inmates in Italian prisons are there for white collar crimes. That is one of the lowest rates in Europe and compares with 12 percent in Germany.

Under the proposed reform, the statute of limitations would be suspended for 18 months between an initial conviction and the start of a first appeal, and suspended for another 18 months after a second conviction before a second appeal begins.

In Italy defendants are allowed two appeals and are considered innocent until the final court ruling is delivered.

The reform is considered inadequate by many prosecutors, who say the time limit should be scrapped as soon as police open investigations into a suspect, as happens in Britain, or when a suspect is sent to trial, as in the United States.

On the other hand, small centre-right parties in the ruling coalition oppose any curbs on the statute of limitations.

Politicians from these parties have held up and watered down the reform, and they said they would demand fresh changes when it is discussed again in the Chamber of Deputies.