
IRAQI FORCES CLAIM CAPTURE OF MOSUL BRIDGE

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The Iraqi army says its US-backed forces have captured a bridge that leads to the ISIL-held city centre from the south, in a new push to drive out the armed group also known as ISIS.

The army on Monday said the bridge, which it named as "al Hurriya", is the second to be reclaimed. The first was seized in the south during the offensive on western Mosul launched on February 19.

However, there are conflicting reports over the latest claim, with sources telling Al Jazeera that the Iraqi army had in fact not retaken the second bridge.

All of Mosul's five bridges over the Tigris River have been destroyed in the fighting but their recapture and repair would aid in the government's fight against ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group, which is present in the north.

As fighting intensifies, 10,000 civilians flee Iraq's Mosul daily

"We control the western end of the bridge," an officer told Reuters news agency.

On Sunday, Iraqi forces launched the new push towards the city's old centre, from the western side of the Tigris.

In a fight marked by explosions and open fire, residents of western Mosul fled in thousands as smoke rose over the city.

The operation in Mosul was officially launched in October last year. In January, its eastern half was declared "fully liberated".

Meanwhile, in Erbil, Iraqi forces have forcibly displaced at least 125 families with alleged links to ISIL, Human Rights Watch said on Sunday. The families have been moved to a camp near Tikrit.

"We came here with only the clothes we had on us," one of the affected women said.

"They beat us and dragged us [from our home]."

According to the report, Sunni tribal groups, together with Iraqi soldiers in the Salah al-Din governorate, forced the families out and destroyed their houses following a council order stating that anyone proved to have been "complicit or affiliated with ISIS" has no right to return to the governorate.

"While politicians in Baghdad are discussing reconciliation efforts in Iraq, the state's own forces are undermining those efforts by destroying homes and forcing families into a detention camp," said Lama Fakih, Human Rights Watch's deputy Middle East director.

"These families, accused of wrongdoing by association, are in many cases themselves victims of ISIS abuses and should be protected by government forces, not targeted for retribution."

More than 200,000 displaced

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a Switzerland-based NGO, more than 45,000 people have fled their homes in western Mosul since the beginning of the push.

IOM's figures indicate that more than 200,000 have been displaced as a result of the offensive.

More than 17,000 people arrived from west Mosul on February 28 alone, while over 13,000 came on March 3, according to the IOM.

On Saturday, a senior Iraqi government official publicly criticised UN-led efforts to aid those displaced by the west Mosul fighting, while the UN said that such assistance is the "top priority".

Al Jazeera's Stefanie Dekker, reporting from Khazir, east of Mosul, said: "Whats striking is how many have arrived here [in the camp for internally displaced people] with no shoes."

"Iraqi authorities say an average of 10,000 people are leaving every day," she added. "Everyone we've spoken to here is telling us an unimaginable story."

Kaynak/Source: