
HEAVY FIGHTING BETWEEN KURDS, IS CONTINUES IN KOBANI

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Gunfire and explosions were audible from the Syrian-Turkish border region near Kobani on Tuesday, indicating little respite from intensive clashes between Kurdish forces, backed up by Syrian rebels, and Islamic State militants.

Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters and moderate Syrian rebels bombarded Islamic State positions in Kobani on Monday, but it was unclear if their arrival would turn the tide in the battle for the town.

Kobani has become a symbolic test of the U.S.-led coalition's ability to halt the advance of the Islamic State group, which has poured weapons and fighters into its assault of the town that has lasted more than a month.

The battle has deflected attention from significant gains elsewhere in Syria by Islamic State fighters, who have seized two gas fields within a week from President Bashar al-Assad's forces in the center of the country.

The arrival in Kobani of the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga and additional Syrian Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters in recent days has escalated efforts to defend the town after weeks of U.S.-led airstrikes slowed but did not reverse the Islamists' advance.

Supplying weapons to Kurds

Meanwhile, Iraq said it would supply semi-autonomous Kurdish region with its needs for heavy weapons to help Kurdish fighters battling militants of the Islamic State group.

The arming of Kurdish forces is a contentious issue because some Iraqi politicians suspect Kurdish

leaders have aspirations to break away from the central government completely.

The Iraqi government has been reluctant to give arms directly to the Kurds because of a desire to see Iraq remain a unified state and a hesitancy to do anything that might bolster Kurdish ambitions for autonomy.

The peshmerga are part of the Iraqi defense system and our support is with them. What the army has is for the peshmerga, and what is required from the army is required from the peshmerga, Defense Minister Khaled al-Obeidi said on Tuesday.

The Baghdad central government will also supply peshmerga fighters with heavy weapons when it gets the arms it contracted on, Obeidi added.

When we have weapons, God willing, they will have their share like other Iraqi troops, Obeidi said after a tour of a peshmerga training center in the Kurdish city of Irbil.

Outgunned and untested for years, the Kurds failed their first major test on the battlefield last June, when Islamic State militants overran their positions in northwestern Iraq, prompting airstrikes by the United States.

Since then, at least eight countries have begun arming the Kurds, whose Soviet-era weaponry proved ineffective against insurgents flush with military hardware plundered from the Iraqi army after it abandoned its posts in June.

Stolen weapons

The Islamic State group was better equipped with weapons plundered from a massive arsenal of U.S. equipment surrendered by the Iraqi army when it collapsed in the north in June. The plunder includes long-range artillery, tanks, armored vehicles, rocket launchers and sniper rifles, as well as tons of ammunition. They were also flush with cash.

The U.S. government has recently begun supplying arms to the Kurds directly, responding to their pleas for military hardware to match the Islamic State group's.

The threat has also spurred cooperation between the region and the federal government in Baghdad, which has withheld arms and salaries from the peshmerga for years due to disputes over oil and budgets.

Britain has also sent just 40 machine guns to Iraq's Kurds and a small group of soldiers to teach fighters how to fire them.

Kurds say they need much heavier weapons, such as tanks and attack helicopters, to take on Islamic State fighters.

More than 100 instructors from Germany, Canada, Australia and United States are now on the ground in Iraqi Kurdistan, teaching the region's peshmerga forces how to use the new weapons.

Kobani children tortured

On Tuesday, Human Rights Watch said Islamic State fighters tortured and abused Kurdish children they abducted from Kobani.

The group said it interviewed four boys from a group of 153 who were taken in late May and held in a town 55 kilometers from Kobani.

HRW said the boys described beatings for anyone who tried to escape or did anything their captors considered misbehavior. The boys were also barred from speaking Kurdish, forced to pray five times a day and to watch videos of captives being beheaded.

A Kurdish official told the New York-based group that the militants released the final group of 25 of the boys last week.

Fred Abrahams, special advisor for children's rights at Human Rights Watch, said the evidence of Islamic State militants torturing and abusing children shows why "no one should support their criminal enterprise."

Syrian Kurds released

On Tuesday, the militant Islamic State group has released 93 Syrian Kurds it captured in February as they made their way from northern Syria to neighboring Iraq, a group monitoring the conflict said.

Islamic State fighters seized about 100 people, accusing them of being members of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has opposed the militants, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. It was not immediately clear why they were released.

The al-Qaida offshoot, which is the target of U.S.-led airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, released all but six of the Kurds in Syria on Monday, the Observatory said.

Kaynak/Source: