

Friday Times

International

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Sacked Turkish academics take protest to the streets



US envoy Tillerson in Mexico to soothe ties



Pakistan on edge as six killed in Lahore bomb blast



MOSUL: Smoke billows as Iraqi forces attack Mosul airport during an offensive to retake the western side of the city from jihadists of the Islamic State group yesterday. —AFP

IRAQI FORCES ENTER IS-HELD MOSUL AIRPORT

MOSUL: Iraqi forces yesterday thrust into Mosul airport on the southern edge of the jihadist stronghold for the first time since the Islamic State group overran the region in 2014. Backed by jets, gunships and drones, forces blitzed their way across open areas south of Mosul and entered the airport compound, apparently meeting limited resistance but strafing the area for suspected snipers. "Right now thank God we're inside Mosul airport and in front of its terminal. Our troops are liberating it," Hisham Abdul Kadhem, a commander in the interior ministry's Rapid Response units, told AFP inside the airport.

Little was left standing inside the perimeter and what used to be the runway was littered with dirt and rubble. Most buildings were completely leveled but Iraqi forces celebrated the latest landmark in the four-month-old offensive to retake Mosul. While Iraqi forces were not yet deployed in the northern part of the sprawling airport compound and sappers cautiously scanned the site for explosive devices, IS appeared to offer limited resistance. As Iraqi forces approached the airport moments earlier, attack helicopters fired rockets at an old sugar factory that stands next to the perimeter wall, sending a cloud of ash floating across the area. The push on the airport was launched at dawn and Iraqi forces stormed it within hours from the southwest.

US forces

The regional command said elite forces from the Counter-Terrorism Service were simultaneously attacking the neighboring Ghazlani military base, where some of them were stationed before IS seized Mosul in June 2014. Control of the base and airport would set government forces up to enter Mosul neighborhoods on the west bank of the Tigris, a month after declaring full control of the east bank. All of the city's bridges across the river are damaged. The US-led coalition has played a key role in supporting Iraqi forces with air strikes and advisers on the ground, and yesterday US forces were seen on the front lines.

The American troops are not supposed to be doing the actual fighting but in recent weeks have got so close to the front that they have come under attack, coalition spokesman Colonel John Dorrian said. "They have come under fire at different times, they have returned fire at different times, in and around Mosul," Dorrian told reporters on Wednesday. He declined to say if there had been any US casualties in the attacks, but an unnamed official later told CNN that several personnel had been evacuated from the battlefield.

The latest push to retake Mosul, the country's second city and the last stronghold of the jihadists in Iraq, was launched on Sunday and involves thousands of security personnel. They

started closing in on the airport four days ago. It is unclear how many jihadists tried to defend the airport but US officials said Monday that only around 2,000 remain in Mosul. There are an estimated 750,000 civilians trapped on the city's west bank, which is a bit smaller than the east side but more densely populated. It includes the Old City and its narrow streets, which will make for a difficult terrain when Iraqi forces reach it because they will be impassable for some military vehicles.

Letters from the east

The noose has for months now been tightening around Mosul and the living conditions for civilians are fast deteriorating. Residents AFP has reached by phone spoke of dwindling food supplies forcing many families to survive on just one meal a day. Medical workers say the weakest are beginning to die of the combined effect of malnutrition and the lack of medicines, which IS fighters are keeping for themselves. An army plane late Wednesday dropped thousands of letters written by residents of the retaken east bank to their fellow citizens across the river. "Be patient and help each other... the end of injustice is near," read one of them which was signed "People from the east side." "Stay in your homes and cooperate with the security forces. They are your brothers, they came to liberate you," read another. — AFP