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MOSUL: Soldiers from the Iraqi Special Forces 2nd division fire a mortar towards a position of the Islamic State (IS) group yesterday in the eastern neighborhood of Samah. —AFP

IRAQ TROOPS BATTLE IS IN MOSUL

UN SAYS MILITANTS KILLED SCORES, STOCKPILING CHEMICALS

MOSUL: Elite Iraqi troops battled the Islamic State group in the streets of Mosul yesterday, as the UN reported militants had executed dozens of people inside the city for alleged "treason". With IS also on the defensive in neighboring Syria, US-backed forces pressed an advance on the militant bastion Raqqa after a sandstorm eased. High winds in the desert separating the Syrian Kurdish-Arab militia alliance from the jihadists' Euphrates Valley stronghold had slowed their advance on Thursday as visibility plummeted.

Iraqi forces had also regrouped after meeting stronger than expected resistance from IS on the east bank of the Tigris River running through Mosul after thrusting into the built-up area last week. Commanders of Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) said troops were advancing on two eastern neighborhoods of the city. In a house near the frontline, Staff Lieutenant Colonel Muntadhar Salem clutched a radio in one hand and a tablet computer in the other with a map showing recaptured buildings. As the troops waited for orders to push forward, incoming mortar rounds shook the pink curtains on the windows of the house.

Later yesterday, the fighting eased off, although CTS forces still occasionally fired mortar rounds towards IS positions in eastern

Mosul's Arbajiyah area. IS fighters reportedly shot dead more than 60 people this week and hung some of their bodies from poles inside Mosul after claiming they had collaborated with Iraqi troops, the UN human rights office said yesterday.

'Treason, Collaboration'

"On Tuesday, ISIL (IS) reportedly shot and killed 40 civilians in Mosul city after accusing them of 'treason and collaboration'," rights office spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani said in a statement in Geneva. And on Wednesday, IS slaughtered another 20 people at the Ghabat Military Base in northern Mosul after accusing them of "leaking information," the statement said. She also said the militants were reportedly stockpiling ammonia and sulphur in civilian areas, possibly for use as chemical weapons.

The battle for Mosul is now in its fourth week, and while troops have entered the built-up area, there are weeks, if not months, of fighting ahead. "Our forces have begun the attack on Arbajiyah. The clashes are ongoing," Salem said. The latest fighting came "after a few days of quiet", he said. Another CTS officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ali Hussein Fadhel, said that the first row of buildings in Arbajiyah had been seized.

"We are within firing range of Karkukli but the full attack has not yet started," he said of another eastern district.

Iraq began the operation to retake Mosul on Oct 17, with federal and Kurdish regional forces closing in on the city from three sides. Pro-government Shiite paramilitaries later began advancing on the town of Tal Afar, which commands the city's western approaches, with the goal of cutting the jihadists off from territory they control in Syria. The advance up the Tigris Valley from the south has been slowest. Troops on that front had the farthest to cover and a string of militant-held towns in their path. On Thursday, the battle neared the remains of ancient Nimrud, some 30 km south of Mosul, raising fears for the famed heritage site already ravaged by jihadist explosives and sledgehammers.

Heavy Strikes

The International Organization of Migration said yesterday more than 47,000 people have been displaced since the Mosul operation began. In Syria, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said their advance on Raqqa was back on track after a sandstorm swept through the area on Thursday. "We

seized control of two new villages yesterday but we didn't advance as far as planned because of the sandstorm," SDF commander Merkhas Kamishlo told AFP.

Fighting has focused on the IS-held village of Al-Heisha, some 40 km north of Raqqa. An AFP correspondent reported heavy air strikes early Friday by the US-led coalition supporting the advance. "Al-Heisha is totally besieged and overnight the US-led coalition hit four Daesh positions inside the village, and destroyed a vehicle being prepared for use as a bomb," Kamishlo said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

The SDF offensive, launched last weekend, has been pushing south from areas near the Turkish border towards Raqqa. Kamishlo said forces advancing south from the towns of Ain Issa and Suluk were close to converging at a position around 30 km from Raqqa. The military in Russia, which has sided with the Damascus regime, said yesterday it had evidence rebels in Syria's besieged eastern city of Aleppo used chemical weapons, a charge the opposition denied. "Experts from the Russian defense ministry have found unexploded artillery ammunition belonging to terrorists which contains toxic substances," the military said in a statement. —AFP