

OVERSHADOWED IRAQI AVIATION TAKES ON IS

QAYYARAH BASE, Iraq: Iraqi army pilot Hossam Jassim banked his helicopter sharply to the left as a Russian-made Mi-35 gunship flying alongside unleashed a missile at a suspected Islamic State group target. An explosion flashed in the desert village below and a huge plume of sand and dust rose into the sky. Jassim gave a thumbs up. "It was a pickup truck with a heavy machine gun," he said later as he emerged from the cockpit at Qayyarah base, around 50 km south of jihadist bastion Mosul. "There were about 10 fighters," he said.

Down on the ground Iraqi forces are battling to wrest back Mosul, tightening the noose in the surrounding desert and grinding their way street-by-street through residential neighborhoods. Meanwhile, in the skies above there is a wide array of hardware backing them up. Dominating attention have been the jets, drones and helicopters from the US-led coalition of foreign countries that has been pounding IS with its awesome firepower.

But, in its shadow, Iraq's fledgling aviation has also been playing its own part - carrying out strikes with far more limited resources to back up its troops. Army pilot Golan Salim looked out at the roughly dozen helicopters - a mixture of Russian Mi-28 and Mi-35, American Bell armed reconnaissance choppers and European EC635s - resting on the tarmac at the Qayyarah airbase.

That morning he said he had flown a mission to take out a group of IS fighters with rocket-propelled grenades. "We finished all these targets," he said. "We have broken them."

Salim said that the previous day he had to take evasive action as he faced machine gun fire from the ground. Despite increasing efforts to weaponise drones, the jihadists are far from threatening the air dominance of their opponents. But they have put up other obstacles. Billowing in the middle distance are giant black clouds of smoke from oil fires that IS lit back in August to obfuscate their retreat as they were pushed from the area. "It is very difficult. Once I could not take off," said Salim. "It is very important to shut down the fire."

Human Shields

The large numbers of civilians that remain inside Mosul and the towns around still under IS controls have also placed major restraints on the air campaign. The United Nations has said the jihadists have forced tens of thousands of locals to march back with them as human shields. Iraq's air capabilities were wiped out during the US-led invasion of the country in 2003, and have been rebuilt from scratch since then with many of the pilots trained by America. — AFP



TALL ABTAH, Iraq: An Iraqi army Mi-35 helicopter shoots a missile at an Islamic State (IS) group target near this village near the city of Mosul on Friday. — AFP



ADEN: Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi disembarks from a plane upon his arrival at Aden airport yesterday. — AFP

YEMEN PRESIDENT IN SURPRISE ADEN VISIT

FIERCE FIGHTING RAGES AFTER TRUCE COLLAPSE

ADEN: Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi flew into Aden from his base in neighboring Saudi Arabia yesterday on a surprise visit to the headquarters of his beleaguered government, an aide said. Hadi is expected to stay for a few days in the southern port city, which is still prey to frequent unrest 18 months after his loyalists drove out Iran-backed rebels with the support of a Saudi-led coalition. It is the president's first visit to Aden in a year and comes two months after Prime Minister Ahmed bin Dagher and seven ministers set up base in the city.

The government had previously operated from exile since Oct 2015. The capital Sanaa, like

most of the north of the country, remains in the hands of the rebel and their allies. Hadi's authority is largely confined to the south and areas along the Saudi border. Even within the south, his loyalists have faced repeated attack by jihadists of both Al-Qaeda and its rival, the Islamic State group. Security chiefs in Aden have been a particular target.

Hadi's visit came as fierce fighting raged between pro-government forces and the rebels following the collapse of a US-backed ceasefire on Monday. The rebels launched a renewed assault on the outskirts of the town of Midi, on the Red Sea coast near the Saudi border,

der, killing six soldiers and wounding 14, a military official said. Loyalist forces captured the town in January but it has since changed hands several times.

The rebels lost two fighters but succeeded in clearing loyalist forces from the road between Midi and Haradh, a town inland that has also changed hands several times in the past year, the official said. Further east, government forces launched a cross-border incursion from the Saudi province of Najran, capturing the long-closed Al-Baqaa customs post and killing 18 rebels, another military official said. Six loyalists were also killed. — AFP

IRAQ LEGALIZES SHIITE MILITIAS

BAGHDAD: Iraq's parliament yesterday voted to accord full legal status to government-sanctioned Shiite militias as a "back-up and reserve" force for the military and police and empower them to "deter" security and terror threats facing the country, like the Islamic State group. The legislation, supported by 208 of the chamber's 327 members, was promptly rejected by Sunni Arab politicians and lawmakers who said it was evidence of what they called the "dictatorship" of the country's Shiite majority.

"The majority does not have the right to determine the fate of everyone else," Osama Al-Nujaifi, one of Iraq's three vice presidents and a senior Sunni politician, told a news conference after the vote. "There should be genuine political

inclusion. This law must be revised." Sunni lawmaker Ahmed al-Masary said the legislation fuels doubts about the participation of all Iraqi communities in the political process. "The legislation aborts nation building," he said, adding that the law created a dangerous parallel to the country's military and police.

The law, tabled by the chamber's largest Shiite bloc, placed the militias under the command of Shiite Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi and gave militiamen salaries and pensions that mirror those of the military and the police. In a statement, Abadi welcomed the legislation and said the "Popular Mobilization" forces, the formal name of the militias, would cover all Iraqi sects, a thinly veiled reference to the much smaller and

weaker Sunni tribal forces. The Shiite militias number more than 100,000. "The Popular Mobilization will represent and defend all Iraqis wherever they are," Abadi said.

The vote comes at a time when the government is waging a major campaign to dislodge the Islamic State group from Mosul, Iraq's second largest city and the last major urban center still controlled by the extremist group. The Shiite militias, most of which are backed by neighboring Iran, have been bankrolled and equipped by the government since shortly after IS swept across much of northern and western Iraq in 2014. Many of these groups existed long before IS emerged, fighting American troops in major street battles during the US military presence in Iraq between 2003 and 2011.

They have played a key role in checking the advance of IS on Baghdad and the Shiite Shrine cities of Samarra and Karbala in the summer of 2014 and later helped liberate IS-held areas to the south, northeast and north of Baghdad, standing in for the security forces which largely collapsed in the face of the IS blitz in 2014. However, their role has somewhat diminished as more and more of Iraq's security forces have regained their strength.

Iraq's Sunni Arabs and rights groups have long complained that the militiamen have been involved in extrajudicial killings, abuse and the theft or destruction of property in areas where they drove out IS. The militias' commanders, however, deny the charges or insist that the excesses are the work of an isolated few. Currently, the militias are tasked with driving IS from the town of Tal Afar west of Mosul. They seized the town's airstrip earlier this week. Al-Abadi met militia commanders at the strip on Thursday. — AP



MOSUL: Fighters of the Popular Mobilization forces take a photo on the frontline against Islamic State militants yesterday. — AP

MEN MADE MESS OF SOMALIA, NOW WOMEN WANT TO FIX IT

MOGADISHU: Raped, abused and subjected to genital mutilation, many women suffer terribly in Somalia, an unrepentantly patriarchal country shown by successive surveys as one of the worst places to be female. A quota reserving 30 percent of parliamentary seats for women in current elections is supposed to help bring change and place at least a share of political power in female hands - but it faces stiff resistance. "Somali women participate in daily life but when it comes to politics it is challenging," said Deqa Yasin, the female deputy head of the national election organizing body. "How do you make the process as inclusive as possible?"

Under international pressure, Somalia's top politicians - federal and state leaders, all men, known as the National Leadership Forum - in August announced the 30 percent female quota be applied to the 54 Senate seats and the 275 parliamentary seats. The quota also applies to the 14,025 electoral college delegates who are the only people out of perhaps 12 million Somalis to vote for members of parliament.

After years of strife, political wrangling and insecurity mean the Horn of Africa nation was unable to hold elections by universal suffrage. But promises of female empowerment have not been kept. As of Thursday, just 23 of 142 parliamentary seats (16 percent) and 10 out of 43 senate seats (23 percent) had been won by women. The previous unicameral parliament had 14 percent women, so the fresh figures are a small improvement. It is unclear what, if anything, might be done when the final tally falls short of the quota.

Men, Guns, Money

Clan and tradition are at the heart of Somalia's electoral process, which means women are not. The 51 members of each electoral college that votes for a given parliamentary seat are themselves chosen by a

group of 135 traditional male elders. In what has been called a "limited" election, the senators and MPs - once all elected - will come together to vote for a new president, but the planned date of November 30 will not be met.

Faced with the ruling on a female quota, many clan leaders do not wish to be represented by women and regard female seats as wasted. Some of the many delays in the election timetable have been caused by arguments and horse-trading over which clan would have to allow one of its precious seats to be reserved for a woman. The reluctance means that the 30 percent quota is unlikely to be met, said Michael Keating, the UN's top representative in Somalia.

Despite the challenges "there's been a slight change of political culture" because of it, with more women involved than in the past, according to Keating. Decades of conflict have played a role. A secular dictatorship in which women held public posts was overthrown in 1991 by a loose alliance of clan-based militias with warlord bosses under whom women were increasingly repressed. Men - usually with guns and always after money - have ruled since that time and presided over Somalia's collapse into the world's preeminent failed state.

'We are Not Unique'

Some argue that the time has come to give women a chance to remedy the situation. Miriam Aweis, 46, won a seat reserved for women in the port city of Kismayo. She said that during the long years of war, women were "the backbone of the community" yet "the traditional system we have" excludes them from politics. As minister for women in 2011, Aweis was an early fighter for a quota of females in politics. "We had to talk to the politicians to get them to accept that women are part of this process and decision-making," she said. — AFP



BAIDOA, Somalia: This photo taken on Nov 16, 2016 shows a Somali woman celebrating after the results of an election were announced. — AFP

LIBYA FORCES FACE IS DEFENSE IN SIRTE

SIRTE: Libyan forces faced fierce resistance yesterday from Islamic State militants defending a final strip of land in their former stronghold of Sirte, losing at least five men, officials said. Forces led by fighters from the city of Misrata and backed by US air strikes have taken all but a few dozen houses near Sirte's Mediterranean seaford since they began their campaign to recapture the city in May. As the battle has worn on they have advanced more cautiously, trying to limit casualties among their fighters and among civilians and captives trapped with the militants.

Islamic State militants have defended their positions using snipers, tunnels, and hidden explosives. The Misrata-led forces said in statements posted on social media accounts that they faced two suicide bombers, one using a belt and the other grenades. They also said that "a woman from Daesh (Islamic State) betrayed our forces and fired towards them when they try to provide a safe passage for her."

A Reuters reporter saw Libyan forces suffering casualties as they tried to advance after using tanks and heavy machine guns being used to destroy Islamic State-held buildings. Five fighters from the Libyan forces had been killed and 18 wounded in the clashes said Akram Gliwan, a hospital spokesman in Misrata. The Misrata-led brigades said they had nevertheless managed to take control of new houses in the contested Ghiza Bahriya district.

Islamic State took full control of Sirte early last year, extending its presence along about 250 km of Libya's coastline. Sirte's loss would leave the militant group without any territory in the North African country, though some of its fighters escaped during the early stages of the campaign and officials fear they will wage an insurgency from the south and west of the city. The US has carried out at least 420 air strikes since beginning an air campaign against Islamic State in Sirte on Aug 1. — Reuters