

## VIOLENT CAMPAIGN WILL CONTINUE: BOKO HARAM

**MAIDUGURI, Nigeria:** Boko Haram's leader has declared in a new video that he is alive, denying Nigerian government claims that his Islamic extremist group has been crushed. President Muhammadu Buhari said last week that soldiers had driven Boko Haram from its last forest enclave in the northeast, boasting "the terrorists are on the run, and no longer have a place to hide."

In a video posted on YouTube, Abubakar Shekau announced: "I am here, well and alive" and that "the battle is just beginning." He urged his followers, in graphic terms, to continue the campaign.

Nigeria's military has claimed to have killed Shekau at least three times, and earlier this year declared he had been fatally wounded. This week, the army said it seized Shekau's Quran in the Sambisa Forest assault - wanting to indicate he was on the run. Each time such claims are made, the Boko Haram leader reappears in a video to mock them.

In the latest, posted on YouTube on Dec 29, he reiterates that "our mission is

to establish an Islamic caliphate" in Nigeria - whose 180 million people are divided almost equally between mainly Muslims in the north and a predominantly Christian south.

In the video, Shekau does not mention some 200 schoolgirls kidnapped from a school in Chibok town who were believed to be held in the Sambisa Forest. Nigeria is unlikely to see an end soon to the deadly suicide bombings, village attacks and assaults on remote military outposts in northeastern Nigeria. The Islamic State group, to which one faction of Boko Haram belongs, announced an attack on an army barracks "killed and wounded many" soldiers on Dec. 22 - the same day the army said it seized the forest hideout. Already, there are reports that the insurgents have been regrouping south of their northeastern stronghold. The seven-year-old Islamic uprising has killed more than 20,000 people, spread across Nigeria's borders, driven 2.6 million from their homes and created a humanitarian disaster with some 5 million people facing starvation. — AP

## EGYPT COURT BACKS GOVT IN RED SEA ISLANDS DISPUTE

**CAIRO:** An Egyptian appeals court yesterday upheld an agreement to give control of two islands in the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia, providing a boost for the government in a case that has prompted rare street protests. The territorial deal, announced in April, caused public uproar among many Egyptians who said the uninhabited islands of Tiran and Sanafir belonged to their country.

The case has become a source of tension with Saudi Arabia, which has provided billions of dollars of aid to Egypt but recently halted fuel shipments amid deteriorating relations. Last week, the Egyptian government approved the deal to hand over the islands and sent it to parliament for ratification, despite the legal dispute over the plan.

On Saturday, the appeals court in Cairo upheld a verdict by a lower court that annulled a ruling by the administra-

tive court, which had said the agreement to hand over the islands was void, judicial sources said. The administrative court had said the agreement violated Egypt's constitution, which prohibits giving away any part of Egyptian territory to another country. A more senior tribunal, the higher administrative court, is due to issue a verdict on Jan. 16. Tiran and Sanafir are in the narrow entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba leading to Jordan and Israel.

Saudi and Egyptian officials say the islands belong to Saudi Arabia and were only under Egyptian control because Riyadh asked Cairo in 1950 to protect them. Many Egyptians reject the government argument, accusing it of selling part of their homeland. Lawyers who oppose the handover say Cairo's sovereignty over the islands dates to a 1906 treaty, before Saudi Arabia was founded. — Reuters



**MOSUL:** Internally displaced people flee fighting between Iraqi forces and Islamic State militants in the Quds neighborhood of Mosul on Friday. — AP

## CAUTION MARKS IRAQI ARMY ADVANCE AGAINST JIHADISTS

### TWO ELITE IRAQI UNITS JOIN MOSUL ADVANCE

**SADA, Iraq:** The earth shook three times with the impact of air strikes targeting Islamic State positions north of Mosul. Only then did the Iraqi troops assembled on the edge of the small farming village advance. The army had gathered on Friday afternoon in a muddy street that showed signs of heavy fighting with the jihadists from a day earlier: store fronts shorn off, electricity poles pulled down, bullet casings carpeting the ground. A rooftop sentinel kept watch.

The Iraqis' tan-coloured Humvees, reinforced with steel plates around the wheels to guard against sniper fire, were dwarfed by four MRAPs (mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles) manned by US military advisers. The second phase of the operation to retake Mosul, Islamic State's last major stronghold in Iraq, began on Thursday after several weeks of deadlock in the most complex operation in the country since the 2003 US-led invasion.

Conventional US forces deploying more extensively in this phase are now visible very close to the front lines. They are backing Iraq's army, federal police and counter-terrorism service (CTS), whose levels of training and experience vary widely. Since the offensive began 10 weeks ago, CTS punched into Mosul from the east and took a quarter of the city, but regular army troops like those in Sada have made slower progress advancing from the north and south, slowing the operation. GLGL

Meanwhile, two elite Iraqi units linked up in Mosul yesterday and will form a joint front to advance westward against the Islamic State group, officers said.

The Rapid Response Division reached the northern edge of Al-Intisar neighborhood, while the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) advanced to the southern side of the adjoining Al-Quds area.

The two neighborhoods are located on the eastern side of Mosul, where security forces have retaken multiple areas from IS, but the city's west is still completely in jihadist hands.

"God willing, Al-Intisar neighborhood is completely liberated," Brigadier General Mahdi Abbas Abdullah, the commander of the Rapid Response Division's 2nd Brigade, told AFP.

"We will become one front" and will advance "towards the river," he said, referring to the Tigris, which divides Mosul in two. Lieutenant Colonel Athir Al-Basri of Rapid Response also confirmed its forces and those from CTS had reached the same main street that divides Al-Intisar and Al-Quds. Iraqi forces launched the massive operation to retake Mosul on October 17, eventually pushing into the city from the east. On Wednesday, Iraqi forces announced the "second phase" of the battle for the eastern side of the city, marking the start of a new round of intensive fighting after progress had previously slowed to a crawl.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi had pledged Mosul would be retaken by year's end.

Earlier in the week, Abadi said the country would need three months to eliminate IS-still an ambitious timeline given that it would mean retaking Mosul, clearing the jihadists out of western territory they hold, and eliminating sleeper cells in government-controlled areas.

#### Advance

Western officials from a coalition providing air support, training and advice to the Iraqi military have hailed the recovery of the army and police, which dropped their weapons and fled Islamic State's blitz across a third of the country in 2014 despite billions of dollars in US support.

"They don't have to be as good as us, they

just have to be better than Daesh," one US military official told Reuters earlier this year, using an Arabic acronym for Islamic State. That marginal advantage, though, means the Mosul campaign is likely to drag on for many months and could wreak significant destruction.

During earlier battles like the one in Ramadi a year ago, coalition officials said they often had to prod the Iraqis to advance rather than wait for aerial bombardment to eliminate all enemy positions. The Iraqi commanders in Sada huddled with the Americans for a few minutes on Friday, and after the third air strike piled into their vehicles. Half a dozen Humvees charged ahead, firing mounted machine guns and a rocket-propelled grenade. As the sound of gunfire pierced the clear blue sky, the US vehicles followed them down the road and appeared to establish overwatch positions in an adjacent field.

"The Americans came this morning. They are for guidance and direction only," said one Iraqi soldier, a bandoleer hanging around his shoulders. "They don't enter combat. They will turn and have our backs." Behind the Americans came a dozen more Iraqi Humvees, some of whose occupants fired wildly as they advanced. One soldier standing in the bed of a military truck lost balance and nearly tumbled out when the vehicle lurched forward.

Army officers said intelligence suggested about 30 Islamic State fighters were holed up inside the village with two car bombs and a truck bomb and were using tunnels between houses and into agricultural areas to furtively resupply or launch attacks. Inside Sada, reporters saw the bodies of a dozen Islamic State fighters the army said were killed in earlier clashes. A soldier held up the severed head of one, an expression of shock still on its face. — Agencies



**RAMALLAH:** Palestinian women cry during the funeral of Maan Abu Qara, 23, in the village Mazrah Ghrbeih near the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Abu Qara was killed by Israeli security forces after an alleged stabbing attack at a checkpoint in the West Bank. — AP

## EGYPT BEGINS HANDING OVER CRASH VICTIMS' REMAINS

**CAIRO:** Egyptian authorities yesterday started handing the remains of those killed in the crash of EgyptAir flight 804 to their families, the airline said.

The Airbus A320 had been flying from Paris to Cairo on May 19 when it crashed into the southeast Mediterranean killing all 66 on board, including 40 Egyptians and 15 French nationals.

EgyptAir said yesterday it had begun "overseeing the handover of the remains of the MS804 plane crew members" to their families. Officials will start handing over the Egyptian passengers' remains on Sunday and the bodies of French passengers and other nationalities will follow, it said, without specifying a timeline. The airliner had been carrying two Iraqis, two Canadians and one passenger each from Algeria, Belgium, Britain, Chad, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.

Egypt's aviation ministry said on December 15 that traces of explosives were

found on victims' remains. France's air safety agency said it was not possible to determine what caused the crash but aviation experts have said there is little chance that a mechanical fault was responsible.

The plane only entered service in 2003, making it relatively new for an aircraft that tends to have an operational life of 30 to 40 years.

Investigators determined that a fire broke out in or near the cockpit before the plane crashed between Crete and the coast of northern Egypt. The disaster came as Cairo was still investigating the October 2015 crash of a Russian passenger plane filled with tourists flying home over the Sinai peninsula. The Islamic State jihadist group claimed responsibility for bombing the Airbus A321 that crashed soon after takeoff from a Sinai resort, killing all 224 passengers and crew.

There has been no such claim linked to May's EgyptAir crash. — AFP



**BEIRUT:** A man walks past a newspaper stand, displaying the As-Safir newspaper, in Beirut's Hamra neighborhood yesterday. — AFP

## LEBANON'S FAMED AS-SAFIR DAILY PRINTS FINAL ISSUE

**BEIRUT:** Its slogan was "the voice of the voiceless", but after four decades the prestigious Lebanese daily As-Safir published its final issue Saturday amid a crisis in the country's print media. A front-page editorial entitled "The nation without As-Safir" said the paper had "become exhausted... but we continue to see some light on the horizon of the profession."

Founded one year before the start of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war, As-Safir was known for its pan-Arab outlook and opposition to American policy in the Middle East. It gave a platform to some of the Arab world's leading intellectual and artistic voices, including Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish.

In March, founder and editor-in-chief Talal Salman announced that the paper, also known for its support for the Shiite militant group Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, would be closing. "We've run out of funds and we're desperately looking for a partner to finance the paper," he told AFP at the time.

Salman blamed Lebanon's political stalemate and internal divisions exacerbated by the war in neighboring Syria. As print media around the world struggle to adapt to the digital age, Lebanese papers have also faced a slump in funding from rival regional powers. During the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, Libya's Moamer Kadhafi, Iraq's Saddam Hussein and the Palestine Liberation

Organization's Yasser Arafat were key financiers. As-Safir acted as the voice of Arab nationalists and defenders of the Palestinian cause while its rival An-Nahar stood for Lebanese pluralism. After the war, Saudi, Qatari and Iranian money took over, but today even Riyadh's vast coffers are running dry.

Financial hardships have also hit An-Nahar. On Friday it told 40 employees not to turn up to work from January until its money situation was resolved, an employee told AFP.

The paper has not paid salaries for almost 15 months. The Lebanese journalists' union said print media, the "national memory of Lebanon", was facing a "major national crisis". — AFP



**ANKARA:** Trees and cars are covered with snow in Ankara yesterday. — AFP