

International

# Desperate to come home, Syrians brave Islamic State mines in Raqqa

## IS scatters mines across the ravaged city

**RAQQA:** Mohammed Kuraji returned to Syria's Raqqa to prepare a homecoming but ended up organising a funeral. Stepping into his home, an unexploded mine detonated and killed his elderly father. "It was terrifying. The blast was so strong that I couldn't hear," said the 26-year-old, who was also wounded in the incident two months ago. The Islamic State group was ousted from its de facto Syrian capital Raqqa in October, but it left mines scattered across the ravaged city.

Residents are desperate to return home, but they are being maimed and killed by unexploded—and sometimes insidiously hidden—ordnance. Under piles of rubble, behind old refrigerator doors, in blown-out buildings, IS has sown death everywhere. The explosives in Kuraji's home were triggered when his father leaned down to pick up a copy of the Quran. "I was thrown back into the neighbour's house and a wall collapsed onto my father," said Kuraji, who has two young children. He spoke to AFP from under a mountain of blankets, pulling back the covers to reveal his legs, set in place by splints and screws in his shins.



### Islamic State has sown death everywhere

#### 'A view to kill'

Demining operations in Raqqa have been supported by the US-led coalition that backed the SDF's drive against IS. In December, the SDF said it had demined half the city. "The hospitals, public institutions, schools, power stations and bakeries are all demined," said SDF official Lokman Khalil. "Raqqa's a big city. There's a huge number of mines and it'll take time," he told AFP. He said the SDF had tried to keep civilians away, but Raqqa natives eager to leave displacement camps and come home had ramped up the pressure.

Now, the city's main streets have been cleared for traffic, though mounds of debris still line the sidewalks. Outside one damaged building, a group of children in oversized sweaters rummage through a pile of twisted metal and corrugated iron. Men with picks and shovels poke through the ruins, emerging occasionally with an unexploded mine. "We're paying people out of our own pockets to clear our streets and houses," said Abu Mohammed, a resident in his forties. The four-storey apartment building he owns has been completely destroyed, but he cannot begin rebuilding because of mines inside. "I have three kids. I keep them locked at home so that mines don't go off as they walk in the streets," he said.

According to the United Nations, some 60,000 people have returned to Raqqa despite warnings of the danger. "The number of unexploded ordnance in Raqqa is something that we have never seen before. It's extreme," said Panos Moutzias, the UN regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria. Between 50 and 70 people were being wounded or killed every week because of mines in the city. "Just to give you a point of comparison, it's the number that takes place in Afghanistan in a year," Moutzias said. "It's planted with a view to kill." —AFP



**RAQQA:** Photo shows shells and undetonated mines strewn near a burnt-out vehicle on a street in Raqqa that were left by the Islamic State (IS) group. — AFP

#### Mine hunting

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces ousted IS from Raqqa in October, then handed the city over to the Raqqa Civil Council. But Raqqa natives are complaining that demining firms hired by the RCC are taking too long, and have taken matters into their own hands. Young men are charging up to \$100 to search and clear homes of mines—a small fortune for war-weary Syrians. "It's becoming a lucrative business. The officials are ignoring it, and we don't have the means," said resident Hamed Saleh, 28.

A large part of his home in Raqqa is inaccessible because of mines. "At any moment, even if a cat is just passing by, a bomb could go off. It's terrifying," said Saleh. According to Human Rights Watch, local officials were receiving about 10 requests for house inspections for a single neighbourhood, every day. But they were only able to clear about 10 cases per week across the entire city, the New York-based rights group said this week. It documented at least 491 people, including 157 children, wound-

## Strong quake shakes Mexico, causing panic

**MEXICO CITY:** A strong earthquake shook southern and central Mexico Friday, causing panic less than six months after two devastating quakes that killed hundreds of people. No buildings collapsed, according to early reports. But two towns near the epicenter, in the southern state of Oaxaca, reported damage and state authorities said they had opened emergency shelters. Later in the day, a helicopter en route to the scene carrying the country's interior minister and the governor of Oaxaca crash landed, killing two people on the ground even as the passengers survived. Both Mexico's National Seismological Service and the US Geological Survey put the quake's magnitude at 7.2.

It triggered Mexico City's alarm system and caused buildings to sway in the capital. It was also felt in the states of Guerrero, Puebla and Michoacan. Panicked residents flooded into the streets, fearing a repeat of the two quakes last September, which caused buildings to collapse and killed a total of 465 people. "To be honest, we're all pretty upset. We start crying whenever the (earthquake) alarm goes off," 38-year-old publicist Kevin Valladolid told AFP through tears after evacuating from his building in La Roma, in central Mexico City.

"We're stressed out, we have flashbacks. So we run out into the street. It's all we can do." On the north side of the city, Julia Hernandez said she felt like she was "in a boat" as the ground swayed beneath her feet. "Is it ever going to stop?" she said. Standing in the middle of the street, her eyes glued to her fifth-floor apartment, Graciela Escalante, 72, could hardly speak. "It was terribly strong. We barely managed to get down the stairs. It was the longest staircase in the world," she said. "We thought everything was going to collapse again." —AFP

## Cameroon's separatists prepare for guerrilla war

**IKOM:** For the first time in his life, Victor Obi believes that the only way to win freedom in Cameroon is with a gun. "I don't want to die, but the only future is our independence, and they will not give it to us," said the student, whose name has been changed for his own safety. The 25-year-old is camped out in a small Nigerian village just kilometres from his home in Cameroon where authorities have launched a crackdown on English-speaking separatists.

"They killed my sister and my brother," said Obi, his voice heavy with hatred. "I have nothing to lose." In December, Obi says soldiers invaded his hometown of Kajifu and started shooting indiscriminately at suspected separatists, said to be running a major training camp in the thick equatorial forest surrounding the village. Kajifu is located in one of Cameroon's two English-speaking regions that have been pushing for independence from the French-speaking elite who rule the West African country.

On October 1, separatists declared the two regions as the self-proclaimed republic of "Ambazonia", marking a turning point for the country's English-speaking minority, which makes up around a fifth of the population. Cameroon President Paul Biya dispatched troops, combat helicopters and armoured vehicles to root out the dissidents, forcing tens of thousands to flee to neighbouring Nigeria.

At least 26 soldiers have been killed in the violence, according to an AFP tally. But the civilian death toll isn't known, with non-governmental organisations and independent media barred from the area. Though the original Ambazonia leaders have dissociated themselves from militant offshoots—they claim their struggle is peaceful—there are a growing number of attacks against the government.

#### 'Raise an army'

On Sunday, before a national youth day parade in Batibo, a town near the Nigerian border, a government official was kidnapped and his car was burnt in an attack claimed by separatists. Lucas Cho Ayaba, leader of the Ambazonian Defence Forces (ADF), took credit for the kidnapping, declaring: "You kill my people, we will chase you to the gates of hell." The ADF, along with three other militias, represent the main groups which count more than 300 fighters, according to an International Crisis Group (ICG) estimate. There are also 10 much smaller but violent factions engaged in the conflict.

Few claim attacks and it's difficult to know exactly who



**BASHU, Nigeria:** Cameroonian refugees, including women and children gather for a meeting at Bashu-Okpambe village in Boki district of Cross Rivers State in Nigeria. — AFP

is responsible, said ICG researcher Hans De Marie Heungoup. "The main issue for Ambazonian groups is that they really lack finance," he said. "If they had money to buy weapons, train and feed their people, they could raise an army." But amidst the chaos, one thing seems certain: the crackdown has radicalised many English-speakers, among them the farmers and managers who have long felt marginalised by Yaounde but have never been interested in politics—until now.

#### 'They are angry'

English-speakers in Cameroon have been marginalised for too long, said Pastor John Mbe, one of more than 33,000 refugees in Cross River State, Nigeria. "Many people have died already, we can't go back home," he said. "young people may not have guns and bullets, but I can tell you they're angry." A source close to the militants says they have adopted the guerilla philosophy of freedom fighters in Eritrea as well as that of Nelson Mandela's anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

In Manyu, a region at the epicentre of the conflict, separatists block roads with tyres and tree trunks to ambush and attack military bases. —AFP

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