

## International

# Death and despair in the last Islamic State's Syrian bastion

## Troops pound Baghouz as thousands flee

**NEAR BAGHOUZ:** Torched tents, a rain of bullets, the thunderous whoosh of warplanes muffling the call to prayer: survivors say life inside the Islamic State group's dying "caliphate" was a bleak catalogue of despair. The crackle and thud of gunfire and shelling filled the air as plumes of thick black smoke rose over the bombed-out village of Baghouz, the last sliver of territory still under IS control. "The last days were horrible," said Sana, a 47-year-old Finnish woman among the thousands who fled the bastion on Tuesday. "Bombing, shooting, burning all the tents... you would wake up and everything was destroyed."

More than 7,000 people, mostly women and children, have fled the shrinking pocket over the past two days, as US-backed forces press ahead with an offensive to crush holdout jihadists. The operation to smash the last remnant of the "caliphate" that IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed in 2014 resumed Friday after a long humanitarian pause. Veiled from head to toe, Sana mixed milk powder with water to feed her children.

The mother of four said she came to Syria with her Moroccan husband four years ago for the sake of Islam. "In the beginning yes, everything was normal," she said, a narrow slit in her veil revealing honey-colored eyes. "Without bombings, every-

thing was nice, we were happy," she told AFP. She has since lost her husband to a car accident and has followed jihadists across Syria's east and northeast, not settling in one place for longer than 16 months. She said she wished she could reverse her decision to join IS. "But I can't change history. I can't change my past, that is my destiny now."

### 'I lost everything'

Rudimentary tents and a small cluster of battered buildings, nestled in a palm-lined bend of the Euphrates, are all that remains of the IS proto-state. Its last survivors seek shelter in underground tunnels and inside tents and cars to hide from the shelling. "We dig tunnels underground, and we cover them with blankets,

that's the tents," said Abu Maryam, a 28-year-old Syrian man from the coastal province of Tartus. "We lived... on top of each other because there were so many people."

He said he lost his wife and two children during shelling on Baghouz only days ago. "They burned and I lost everything," he said. "I just want to leave and rest a bit." Jihadists allowed women, children and the wounded to quit the bombed-out bastion in recent weeks, but it has prevented men of fighting age from fleeing, according to survivors. But jihadists are now allowing men to leave as death

and destruction take hold.

Fatima Abdul Jasem said conditions inside the jihadist encampment were "catastrophic". But the Iraqi woman waited until jihadists released her 20-year-old son before escaping, with him and her two daughters. "Men under 40 who wanted to go out were imprisoned in a guarded tent," she said. "But

only two days ago they let them go". Jihadists themselves are among those who have left. Some 400 IS fighters were captured on Tuesday night as they attempted to slip out of Baghouz. The US-backed Syrian Democratic forces said the escape was organized by a network that had planned to smuggle them to remote hideouts. — AFP



**NEAR BAGHOUZ:** Civilians evacuated from the Islamic State (IS) group's embattled holdout of Baghouz wait for bread and water at a screening area held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor. — AFP

## Fear reigns in the heart of separatist Cameroon region

**BUEA:** In the capital of Cameroon's Southwest Region, people drily say the streets are so dangerous that even the dogs are too scared to go outside. The city has been stalked by violence for 18 months, after English-speaking separatists declared an independent state and took up arms against the French-speaking authorities. In Buea, barely a day goes by without the "Amba Boys" attacking police stations, state-run enterprises and public buildings—anything that is a recognizable symbol of the state. Gunfire is heard frequently, despite army patrols introduced as part of a wide-ranging crackdown, and kidnapping is rampant.

Last month, around 15 rebels entered the city, firing into the air and burning cars. After they left, people found a decapitated head left on the pavement. The victim has so far not been identified. A disturbing video being shared on social media shows a woman in her 30s being disfigured by separatists who accuse her of being an informant for the army. On Tuesday, the EU issued a statement warning about Cameroon's political and security situation, pointing especially to the two restive anglophone regions, where there were "persistent violence and violations of human rights".

### Fear

One civil servant, who asked not to be identified, told AFP he had been living in his office for five months out of fear of being attacked. "I spend the night at the office to avoid the trip home," he said. "Informants could see that I was disobey-

ing the Amba Boys' ban on working for the government." Nearby, his camp bed was folded in one corner, just beside his suitcase. Two jackets were hung up nearby while the remains of the previous day's meal sat on a hotplate.

The town, once known as a peaceful haven nestled at the foot of Mount Cameroon, has been transformed by the conflict. "Buea is suffering," one local radio presenter recently lamented on air. Some businesses say they are struggling to survive. Fearing reprisals, they do not dare defy the shutdowns regularly declared by the rebels. The cost of living is mounting. One woman selling mangoes at a crossroads for 1,000 francs (about 1.8 euros, \$2) apiece said the price of the fruit was rising "because there are few people to go and harvest them."

### Exodus

The authorities in the Cameroonian capital Yaounde have responded to the rebellion by stepping up the security presence in the region. Troops and rebels alike have been accused of targeting civilians. At least 500 civilians and more than 200 members of the security forces have died in clashes, attacks and a government crackdown, the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank says. At least 437,000 people have fled the two regions, according to UN estimates, with another 32,000 fleeing across the border to Nigeria.

Many people in Buea have fled to the port of Limbe, around 30 kilometers (19 miles) away. The road between the two towns is littered with the burnt-out remains of cars. As night falls on Down Beach, the view over the bay comes with an incessant roar of armored vehicles carrying troops. In the local schools, teachers have got used to pupils turning up wearing uniforms from other establishments. "They come from nearby villages," said a teacher at one secondary school. "We put up with it." — AFP

## Saudi sisters stranded in Hong Kong granted extended stay

**HONG KONG:** Two Saudi sisters marooned in Hong Kong after fleeing their family have been granted an extended stay in the city until next month, their law firm said yesterday, as they urgently seek sanctuary in a third country. The siblings are the latest example of Saudi women escaping the ultra-conservative kingdom only to find themselves stranded in foreign cities and making public appeals for their safety. The young women, aged 20 and 18, said they made a break from an abusive family during a holiday in Sri Lanka last September, with the intention of heading for Australia.

But they only made it as far as Hong Kong. The two women—who use the aliases Reem and Rawan—said they were intercepted at the airport by Saudi consular officials and their air tickets cancelled. The pair, who entered Hong Kong as visitors, also had their passports revoked, leaving them stranded in the southern Chinese city. Their stay was due to expire on the last day of February, their lawyer Michael Vidler had previously said. As that deadline loomed they issued a fresh appeal last week asking authorities to allow them to remain while they seek emergency rescue visas to another country.

In a statement Thursday, Vidler & Co Solicitors said the immigration department confirmed the pair would be "further tolerated" until April 8 but added "the Director of Immigration now asserts that despite being tolerated, the sisters are liable to prosecution and removal as overstayers". Reem and Rawan said they are "in constant fear of being found by the Saudi authorities and our family and forced to return to Saudi Arabia," in a statement provided by the law firm. — AFP