

Ancient town bears scars of IS destruction

PALMYRA, Syria (AP) — Explosions rocked the ancient town of Palmyra on Friday and on the horizon, black smoke wafted behind its majestic Roman ruins, as Syrian army experts carefully detonated hundreds of mines they say were planted by Islamic State militants before they fled the town.

An Associated Press crew visiting the town Friday witnessed firsthand the destruction inflicted by the extremist group on the town's famed archaeological site, less than a mile away from the modern-day town of the same name, now completely deserted.

While some parts of the site, including the Roman-era grand colonnades and amphitheater appeared relatively untouched, the damage was very much visible elsewhere.

The remarkable Arch of Triumph, built under the Roman emperor Septimius Severus between A.D. 193 and A.D. 211, has been reduced to a pile of stones, blown up by IS extremists who filmed the destruction for the world to see. The monumental arch once sat atop the famed colonnaded streets of the ancient town.

The Temple of Baalshamin and parts of the Temple of Bel, one of the best-preserved Roman-era sites, are also destroyed.

Apart from the Roman ruins themselves, heavy damage could be seen on parts of the walls of Palmyra's towering Mamluk-era citadel, built during the Islamic conquest in the 13th century. On top of the scarred citadel, a Syrian flag flies in the wind.

Palmyra is located about 155 miles east of Damascus, the Syrian capital. Government troops, backed by allied militiamen and Russian airstrikes retook the town on Sunday from IS militants who had controlled Palmyra and its environs for 10 months.

Ancient Palmyra is a UNESCO heritage site — an archaeological gem that attracted tens of thousands of tourists every year.

It was completely deserted on Friday, except for Syrian army soldiers working on dismantling explosives and visiting journalists. The town — about a kilometer away from the ruins — is completely deserted, its remaining residents had fled as the Syrian army's offensive against IS began a month ago.



A photo shows the famous Roman Theater at the ancient city of Palmyra, Syria, on April 2. An Associated Press crew visiting the town Friday witnessed firsthand the destruction inflicted by the extremist group on the town's famed archaeological site, less than a mile away from the modern-day town of the same name, now completely deserted.



This photo released March 27 by the Syrian official news agency SANA, shows a general view of Palmyra citadel, central Syria.

Traces of the fighting could be seen all around. Burned cars parked on the side of the road, electricity cables strewn about on the streets, and scattered empty water tanks

"They booby-trapped everything trees, doors, animals."

— A Syrian officer, on the retreating IS troops

sprayed on a stone wall. "Lasting and Expanding," it read in Arabic, a logo of the Islamic State group. "The Islamic State" is scribbled on another nearby wall.

A Syrian officer told reporters that more than 3,000 mines have so far been dismantled. "They booby-trapped everything, trees, doors, animals," he said, speaking of the militants. Russian sappers have arrived in Syria to help the Syrian army clear mines in the town.

Later Friday, Syria's state-run SANA news agency reported that Syrian engineering teams and popular defense groups uncovered a mass grave in a northeastern neigh-

borhood of Palmyra containing the remains of about 40 people.

The report, which could not be independently verified, said the people were killed by IS extremists. It said some bodies were beheaded, others bore signs of torture.

The recapture of Palmyra was a strategic coup for President Bashar Assad through which he hopes to convince the West that the Syrian army is a credible partner in combating terror as it ramps up the fight against the Islamic State.

"The Syrian army is defending Rome and London in as much as it is defending Damascus," another officer told the visiting reporters Friday. Both officers spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to give statements to media crews.

He handed reporters a booklet he said the militants had apparently distributed to Palmyra residents.

It reads: "Loyalty to Islam, not to the nation."

BRIEFLY

Obama urges more action on nuclear security, terror

WASHINGTON (AP) — World leaders declared progress Friday in safeguarding nuclear materials sought by terrorists and wayward nations, even as President Barack Obama acknowledged the task was far from finished.

Closing out a nuclear security summit, Obama warned of a persistent and harrowing threat: terrorists getting their hands on a nuclear bomb. He urged fellow leaders not to be complacent about the risk of catastrophe, saying that such an attack by the Islamic State or a similar group would "change our world."

Despite their calls for further action, the roughly 50 leaders assembled announced that this year's gathering would be the last of this kind. This year, deep concerns about terrorism were the commanding focus, as leaders grappled with the notion that the next Paris or Brussels could involve an attack with a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb.

So far, no terrorists have obtained a nuclear weapon or a dirty bomb, Obama said, crediting global efforts to secure nuclear material. But he said it wasn't for lack of the terrorists trying: Al-Qaida has sought nuclear materials, IS has deployed chemical weapons and extremists linked to the Brussels and Paris attacks were found to have spied on a Belgian nuclear official.

After 10 days, Brussels airport remains closed to passengers

BRUSSELS (AP) — Struck by suicide bombers 10 days ago, the airport known as "the heart of Europe" has stopped beating temporarily, causing headaches for thousands of business and vacation travelers, and painful financial losses for Belgium's capital and tourism industry.

It's still unclear when Brussels Airport will reopen. But a key hurdle appeared to have been cleared Friday evening when police unions, which had threatened a strike, reached a preliminary deal with government negotiators on how to bolster security to minimize more violence. The agreement, which must be formally approved by both sides, calls in part for hiring 200 additional airport police officers, said Stephane Deldicque, an official with the CSC Public Service Union.

A Belgian government official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to make public statements, told The Associated Press things now appeared on track for passenger service to resume at a reduced level on Sunday morning.

Patrick Bontinck, general manager of Visit Brussels, the official municipal tourist organization, said hotel reservations have dropped by half since the March 22 attacks at the airport and the Brussels Metro, meaning a loss of 8,000-10,000 visitors a day to the city.

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